State Government Victoria

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

A Guide to Help Schools Increase School Completion

Every child, every opportunity

A Guide to Help Schools
Increase School Completion

Dr Suzanne Rice and Associate Professor Stephen Lamb

(with the assistance of Anne Thomas,
Maria Candiloro and Sandra McAulliffe)
Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning
University of Melbourne

Contents

Foreword

The vision of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is that every young Victorian thrives, learns and grows to enjoy a prosperous and fulfilling life – the completion of Year 12 or its equivalent, is one of the strongest guarantees of achieving this prosperity, social mobility and economic security.

Students who do not complete Year 12 or its equivalent are more likely to become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer, have lower earnings, and over the course of their lives, accumulate less wealth, a problem that will only increase with time as employers seek a more highly skilled workforce. The connection is simple - retention, engagement and higher levels of education opens up broader opportunities that lead to better personal, social and economic outcomes.

The *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* emphasises the need to improve participation and outcomes for all young people and the critical importance of increasing the number of young people completing Year 12 or its equivalent. In order to achieve this we must ensure that our schools and school system can meet the diverse needs of all our young people and provide flexible development and learning opportunities to address disengagement and support those at risk of early leaving.

The *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion Report* identifies successful strategies that schools are implementing to improve student engagement and increase rates of school completion.

This publication, *A Guide to Help Schools Increase School Completion*, documents how the effective intervention strategies identified in the Report can be implemented by schools. The Guide explores how schools can plan and implement the strategies to improve student engagement and increase student retention. Used in conjunction with the Report, the Guide provides schools with the tools for planning, reflection and evaluation and maps out how the strategies can be implemented by schools and communities.

Both the Report and the Guide were commissioned by the Youth Transitions Division, Office for Policy, Research & Innovation, and undertaken by Associate Professor Stephen Lamb and Dr Suzanne Rice from the Centre for Post Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of Melbourne.

Victoria has led the way in Australia in terms of year 12 or equivalent completion and is well on the way to achieving the Victorian Government target that by 2010, 90% of young Victorian will have completed year 12 or equivalent. This is a result of the innovative and responsive strategies that many Victorian schools are implementing and I congratulate these schools for their hard work and innovation. This *Guide* showcases several such examples from schools in Victoria.

I trust that this Guide will be a valuable resource for schools and that it helps schools to plan more strategically and effectively for change to raise retention and increase completion so that all our young people can enjoy a productive and fulfilling life.

Dr Dahle Suggett

Deputy Secretary
Office for Policy Research and Innovation

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction and background

This Guide explores ways that schools can plan and implement strategies to improve student engagement and increase student retention. It discusses how to put effective strategies to work in the school and community.

The first part of the Guide presents an outline of how schools can plan for change and gives an overview of a strategic planning process for raising retention. The second part focuses on implementation, and how schools might select the strategies that are most likely to suit the needs of their particular students, tailoring a retention improvement plan to their own school.

The Guide is written in the context of government recognition of the need to support efforts to increase school completion. Retention rates across Victorian government schools in 2006 were on average at about 75 per cent, but varied from below 30 per cent in some schools to over 90 per cent in others (ABS, 2007; DEECD, 2007). Rates are lowest in schools that have the highest proportions of children from disadvantaged backgrounds — indigenous students, refugees, students from low SES families, ESL students, students with integration needs, and low achievers. Schools with large numbers of these students face particular difficulties in raising student retention.

The recent *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (2008)* stresses the importance of increasing the number of young Victorians remaining in an educational setting until they have completed at least Year 12 or the equivalent. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) has in recent years instituted a number of initiatives. The Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) program was designed to ensure that post-compulsory students have a plan that will guide their progression to further education, training or work. MIPS also enables schools to assist students at risk of early leaving by offering them better-targeted and more intensive support in determining their future directions. In addition, the Student Mapping Tool was developed and distributed to schools in 2007. The Student Mapping Tool helps schools to determine each student's level of risk according to the key risk factors associated with early school leaving in Australia, such as weak literacy skills and poor attendance patterns. The provision of better co-ordinated support through School Focused Youth Services has also helped schools address the needs of these students.

As part of its initiatives to support schools, the Youth Transitions Division of DEECD commissioned the University of Melbourne to conduct research into interventions that have been found, both here and overseas, to work to keep at-risk students engaged in learning. The focus was on strategies that could be implemented at a school level in Victorian secondary schools. The completed Report, *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion*, used both international findings and research in Victorian schools to identify these strategies. The Report outlined what schools can do, in terms of effective strategies and interventions, to improve student engagement and raise student retention. Responses to the Report generated requests for further information on how to plan for, implement and evaluate the impact of the strategies in a school setting.

This Guide has been developed in response to these requests. It is designed to support schools in identifying what a school already has in place, which issues appear to be having most impact on student engagement and retention at the school, and how the school might select the strategies that are most likely to address the needs of its particular students. The Guide also incorporates information on how schools might plan for implementation, and measures they may wish to use to assess the effectiveness of the changes they put into place.

The Guide is not intended to provide a single step by step recipe. Rather, it aims to provide schools with some guidelines on strategic planning to improve student retention, and information on how it might approach selecting and implementing initiatives as part of an improved student retention plan.

1.1 The strategies

The strategies that were found by the *Effective Strategies* research to be associated with increased student engagement and retention are presented here.

For a detailed discussion of each of these strategies and research concerning their effectiveness, the reader is referred to the *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion Report*, Chapter 5. The Report can be downloaded from the DEECD website at: **http://www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/**

Table 1: Successful interventions for improving student engagement and reducing early school leaving

Promoting a supportive school culture:

Commitment to continuous improvement
Commitment to success for all
Flexibility and responsiveness to individual need
High expectations
Encouraging student responsibility and autonomy
Shared vision

School-wide strategies:

Broad curriculum provision in the senior years
Offering quality Vocational Education and Training (VET) options
Providing programs that are challenging and stimulating
Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy skill growth
Programs to counter low achievement
Pathways planning and quality careers guidance and counselling
Strategic use of teachers and teaching resources
Smaller class sizes
Mini-school or school-within-a-school organization
Team-based approaches to teaching, learning and pastoral care
Priority professional development
Community service
Cross-sectoral initiatives
Attendance policies and programs
Initiatives to improve connections with parents
Conflict resolution, mediation or problem-solving programs

Student-focused strategies:

Student case management
Mentoring
Welfare support
Targeted assistance for skill development among low achievers
Tutoring and peer tutoring
Supplementary or out-of-school-time programs
Pathways planning for at-risk students
Targeted financial support
Project-based learning for disengaged students
Creative arts-based programs for at-risk students
Programs to improve students' social skills

1.3 Using the guide

This Guide is designed to inform discussions and assist schools and their communities as they work towards increasing student engagement and retention, by providing tools for planning, reflection and evaluation.

This Guide is based on the *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion* Report, and should be used in conjunction with that Report. It was noted in that Report that different school contexts may affect in different ways the issues associated with student retention and engagement. In smaller schools in rural areas, for example, the needs of students may be different to those of students in large urban schools where students are drawn from a broader, more diverse community. Schools are best placed to know the dimensions of the needs of their particular students and what will be appropriate to address them. Schools are also at different points in working towards increasing student retention and engagement — some schools may have many strategies and programs in place, others may be just beginning.

1.2   Single or multiple strategies?

The interventions outlined on the previous page are those identified in the *Effective Strategies Report* as having a positive impact on student engagement and retention.

However, in many instances both here and overseas, schools combine a number of strategies targeting particular groups of students, or all students across the school. So, for example, a school may target the needs of particular groups of disadvantaged students by implementing a suite of strategies or interventions that incorporates additional pathways planning, student case management and project-based learning. Or a school

may develop mini-schools that work on team-based approaches to teaching and learning, and provide targeted professional development to staff about working in teams. In most instances, schools will need to focus on particular student needs and provision issues, and develop appropriate multi-faceted approaches incorporating a number of strategies. However, sometimes implementing a single strategy may be the most appropriate response to a particular issue or specific need.

So different schools can be expected to use the Guide in different ways, and the same school might use the guide differently over several years as its students, staff, programs and the broader school community change and develop. There is no one "right" way to use the Guide, and schools are encouraged to adapt and select from materials as best suits them and their communities.

Part 1 of the Guide presents an overview of the strategic planning process needed to help implement strategies for increasing school retention.

It suggests that schools look at establishing a process for change by forming a team or group or identifying critical staff to oversee implementation and involve the community and school staff from the start. It then describes various stages needed in the planning process including, assessing the school's current position and practices, and identifying areas for improvement, identifying appropriate interventions or strategies to address needs and target improvement, and preparing for implementation. This section of the Guide consists of the following sections:

1. Organising for change: Identifying how change processes will be coordinated across the school, and who will be involved in coordination.

2. Assessing the school's current position: How to use and develop a range of information sources to determine which strategies are already in place at the school, factors currently impacting on student engagement and retention, and how school context may be interacting with these.

3. Planning for implementation: Selecting the strategies most likely to foster improved engagement and retention, identifying how implementation of current strategies might be further improved, and planning for implementation.

Part 2 focuses on implementation and provides practical information from schools and other sources on how to implement various strategies to promote successful outcomes.

The various chapters suggest strategies that schools can adopt or adapt to implement the interventions within their schools. Both school-wide and student group-based interventions are discussed and illustrated.

Schools may tailor these interventions to their local conditions. Lists of resources and references that can be used to assist schools conclude the Guide. It includes a list of people and organisations that may assist schools in their drive to improve students' ongoing connections to education.

Part 2 of the Guide includes the following sections:

4. Developing a supportive school culture: advice from successful schools on working towards stronger school cultures, including advice on how to "bring people on board".

5. How to implement change: case studies of implementation in Victorian schools that have worked successfully to increase engagement and retention.

6. Evaluating the impact of changes: How to assess the impact of initiatives and use data to generate cycles of improvement.

7. Advice from successful schools: tips from successful schools on what makes it work.

8. Who can help? Links to references, external agencies and resources that may assist your school in planning and implementation.

Before providing detailed information of each of the key stages, we present a brief overview of the planning and implementation process schools will need to consider.

2. Overview of planning and implementation

Strategic planning for the introduction of effective strategies to raise school completion involves a series of steps as displayed in the diagram below:

Establish process for change

Assess current position

Set goals

Select strategies

Plan implementation

Implement strategies

Evaluate impact

(1) Establishing a process for change: Identify a group of people responsible for guiding the change process and overseeing implementation.

(2) Assessing the school's current position: Examine what the school offers, particularly for at-risk students, and where there is potential for improvement.

(3) Setting goals: Identify specific goals for student achievement, engagement and retention.

(4) Selecting strategies to meet the goals: Having ascertained the patterns and level of needs that exist among students at the school, decide on the strategies that are most likely to address the needs and help improve student engagement.

(5) Planning for implementation: Determining the resources and processes needed to implement strategies effectively, and outlining a timeframe.

(6) Implementation of strategies: Put the implementation plan into action.

(7) Evaluating the impact of change: Assess the effectiveness of the strategies, particularly the extent to which they have been effective in improving student engagement and retention.

Ideally, these steps form a sequential iterative process, in which initiatives are modified and built upon in response to shifting and emerging patterns of need within the school community and an assessment of the impact of the selected strategies.

In reality, the seven steps of organising, assessing, goal setting, selecting, planning, implementing and evaluating are rarely clear-cut — boundaries overlap, and there is movement backwards and forwards between the stages. Working to improve what schools offer students can at times feel chaotic or unwieldy, and schools need to be prepared for setbacks in working to deliver change. The school's leadership team has a particularly important role to play in helping staff remain positive and focused on the main goal — helping students to remain linked in to education and learning.
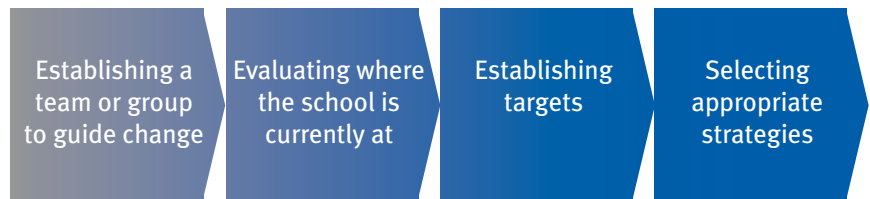
The following sections provide more detail on each of the key steps. Part 1 focuses on planning for change and Part 2 focuses on implementation.

Part 1:
Planning for change

3. The planning process

Schools already plan extensively for a range of purposes, and the key elements of the planning process will be familiar to them. Important is each of the following:

| Establishing a team or group to guide change | Evaluating where the school is currently at | Establishing targets | Selecting appropriate strategies |

3.1 Team for guiding change

For change to be implemented successfully in schools, there needs to be adequate coordination of efforts across the school. Schools may wish to form an ongoing team or committee comprising various staff such as members of the leadership group, welfare and MIPS co-ordinators, or interested teaching staff to oversee the process of determining how the school can best lift engagement or retention, and to coordinate the implementation of strategies. Alternatively, the school may already have in place a suitable team that is willing to take on this responsibility, and the team may want to co-opt additional members as appropriate. This team would be responsible for determining the adequacy of current provision, identifying where improvements can be made, overseeing implementation and evaluating effectiveness.

Ideally, schools would conduct an audit of current practice and strategies, and develop a plan for improving student engagement and retention based on the findings of the audit. Regular evaluations would need to be undertaken, with a more substantial evaluation after an extended period (such as every three years). Wherever possible, these plans should be linked to the school's strategic plan and the review cycle, however, schools that are currently mid-cycle should nevertheless aim to audit practice and develop plans for improvement without waiting for the school review.

The schools in the *Effective Strategies* study that had achieved major improvements in student engagement and retention stressed that this is a long-term process, and when planning, schools should bear in mind that producing substantial improvements will often take considerable time.

3.2 A framework for thinking about provision

In determining how to better meet student needs to increase retention, it can be helpful to have a frame of reference. In the *Effective Strategies Report*, strategies were found to work because they did one or more of the following:

- **Fostered connectedness:** Strategies increased the degree of connectedness between the school, the students, the parents and the broader community.

- **Built student responsibility and expectations:** Strategies worked to improve student confidence, pride and sense of ownership by promoting higher levels of student responsibility and increasing expectations of students.

- **Provided tasks for students with immediate, tangible benefits:** Strategies increased the relevance and "rewards" in schooling by providing tasks that were practical and for which there was a concrete outcome.

- **Made spaces within schools and curricula for diverse student needs:** Strategies worked to increase the school's responsiveness and relevance to a broader range of students.

- **Addressed poor student achievement:** Strategies improved student achievement in core areas, lessening a sense of failure and allowing students better access to other areas of the curriculum, and

- **Addressed students' practical personal obstacles to staying at school:** Strategies tackled some of the out-of-school issues that can prove serious impediments to students' continuing their education, such as lack of funds, lack of transport, or caring responsibilities.

In the planning documents that follow, these six areas form the framework for thinking about how provision may be improved. In identifying areas of student need, schools are encouraged to consider whether, for example, there are practical barriers for students that may need to be addressed, or whether low levels of student achievement may be a central barrier to improving retention and engagement. Following the sections on assessing current provision and student needs, there is a table outlining which strategies are likely to be most appropriate in addressing each of these six areas. (See pg. 22).

"Change is slow! All this began at least ten years ago, we've built on initiatives. This requires a certain amount of goodwill on the part of staff. Everything has evolved over time, we've tried things that haven't worked, we then either tweak it or get rid of it. Be prepared to try, be prepared to admit something doesn't work"

4. Assessing the school's current position

Before forming a plan, each school needs to assess its current position — what it offers, which issues appear to be impacting most on student engagement and retention, and where there is capacity to improve.

This involves conducting a school audit using a wide range of information sources: existing school data, information from school staff, and feedback from students, parents and other community members. Even in schools in which student engagement and retention appear strong, an audit can provide fresh and sometimes unexpected insights into issues facing particular groups of students or families. The audit will allow a school to determine what it has in place that is working well, what is in place but could be strengthened, and where there are opportunities to implement new strategies and improve provision.

Some of the central questions schools need to consider in auditing their current practices are:

- What are our current levels of student retention? What are our real retention rates? What are our apparent retention rates? What percentage of students who leave move into other forms of education or training, including apprenticeships? How do these rates compare with the government target of 90% of students completing Year 12 or equivalent?

- How strongly are students engaged in their learning? How do our students score on the DEECD student engagement measures? How high are student absentee rates? Are students punctual? Do students generally complete set work? Do students see the school's course offerings as relevant to their future plans? Do most students enjoy school most of the time? Are students sufficiently challenged by lessons and are our expectations high?

- What practices and strategies does the school have in place to improve retention and engagement? What programs are working to increase our students' engagement? Are particular programs and strategies helping keep students in education? To what degree does the school's culture promote student engagement and retention?

• What patterns of need are apparent amongst students? Are particular groups of students particularly at risk of early leaving? Are our student achievement levels low, or are they especially low for some groups of students? Are all students achieving at the level needed to continue with education after school? Are there particular student welfare needs the school is unaware of or has not been able to address? Are there students for whom the school offers few appropriate or engaging subjects? Are there students who need a different type of course?

• Are there students who would benefit from more applied learning methods? Do some students seem to get "lost" in our school structures? Do students leave the school when staff are unaware that they have been having problems?

• How well do current strategies match patterns of need? Are there patterns of need that are not being addressed by current strategies? Do strategies in place tackle achievement as well as welfare issues? Are the needs of all groups of at-risk students met by these strategies - do the strategies meet the needs of Koorie students, disabled students, refugee students?

• What else might be put in place? Could the school add programs that would address the needs of specific at-risk groups? Are there additional means of lifting student achievement at the school? Are there strategies the school could use to build better connections with the school community? Could the school provide alternative programs for the most disengaged students?

• How could strategies currently in place be improved? Are there ways in which curricula might be better matched to student needs and interests? Should the school be building better links to other organisations and providers? Could the school offer current successful programs to a larger number of students? To a more tightly targeted group of students? Could strategies be adapted to better meet the needs of particular groups of students (for example, those with disabilities)? Do we need further professional development to enable staff to conduct programs more effectively?

4.1 Where are we now? Current strategies in place

The first step in working towards improvement is an accurate assessment of the school's current position. This involves gathering information on how well the school is meeting student needs, what strategies are in place and how these can be improved or augmented.

Schools can draw on a range of data sources to assess how well the school is working to retain and engage students, and much information is already available in the school community.

What data do we already have?
- The Attitudes to School Survey data
- On Track data
- School Level Report data
- Parent survey data
- MIPS data
- Data from case management work with students

Schools can use this data to determine how well the school is currently working to engage and retain students, compared to similar schools.

Victorian secondary schools are already aware of the need to improve the level of their students' engagement with school and hold students within viable pathways that lead to a substantial education and stable employment.

All government secondary schools with students in Years 10-12 will have in place some form of MIPs program, and most will also have a number of the other strategies listed in the table on page 6.

So one of the first steps in forming plans for the school will be to identify the policies, programs and strategies it already has in place, and how well they appear to be working. School staff, especially MIPs staff, welfare staff, year level coordinators and the leadership team are likely to have the most detailed knowledge of what the school already has in place and how well it is working.

These staff will be a valuable resource for identifying what strategies the school is already using to improve engagement and retention. The following example current practice form, pro forma and checklist may help schools to document what is currently in place. Schools need to refer to the strategy table on page 6 to identify which of the strategies is a part of each program they run.

Documenting current practice: Example

Program	Target group/s	Strategies	Possible areas for improvement
Practical learning for practical kids program	Vocationally oriented at-risk students in Years 9 and 10	Project-based learning for disengaged students Targeted assistance for skill development among low achievers	Currently not large enough to meet student demand – consider expansion
MIPs	All students from 15 years of age	Pathways planning and quality careers guidance and counselling	Starting too late for the most at-risk students - consider extension to at-risk students in Year 9 Improve links to local TAFEs to help students planning a TAFE course
Year 9 Get Real Program	All Year 9 students	Community service Cross-sectoral initiatives Providing programs that are challenging and stimulating	Mostly working well Consider contacting other community organisations to provide students with a broader range of community service options Perhaps expand from 4 weeks to an entire term
Year 7 literacy Program	Year 7 students with weak achievement in literacy	Targeted assistance for skill development among low achievers Tutoring and peer tutoring	Need further PD for staff to increase confidence in teaching literacy Source more appropriate beginning reading materials for older readers

Documenting current practice: Pro forma

Program	Target group/s	Strategies	Possible areas for improvement

Checklist of strategies the school currently has in place:

Domain	Strategy	Not evident	Could be improved	Working well
Supportive culture	Commitment to continuous improvement			
	Commitment to success for all			
	Flexibility and responsiveness to individual need			
	High expectations			
	Encouraging student responsibility and autonomy			
	Shared vision			
School-wide strategies	Broad curriculum provision in the senior years			
	Offering quality VET options			
	Providing programs that are challenging and stimulating			
	Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy skills			
	Programs to counter low achievement			
	Pathways planning and quality careers guidance and counselling			
	Strategic use of teachers and teaching resources			
	Smaller class sizes			
	Mini-school or school-within-a-school organization			
	Team approaches to teaching, learning and pastoral care			
	Priority professional development			
	Community service			
	Cross-sectoral initiatives			
	Attendance policies and programs			
	Initiatives to improve connections with parents			
	Conflict resolution, mediation or problem-solving programs			
Student-focused strategies	Student case management			
	Mentoring			
	Welfare support			
	Targeted assistance for low achievers			
	Tutoring and peer tutoring			
	Supplementary or out-of-school-time programs			
	Pathways planning for at-risk students			
	Targeted financial support			
	Project-based learning for disengaged students			
	Creative arts-based programs for at-risk students			
	Programs to improve students' social skills			

4.2 Setting goals

At this point, it will be very useful to discuss and set goals for retention and engagement in terms of data measures available.

Setting goals will give the planning and organising phase focus, help staff and other school community members understand the necessary scope of the task and work, and help provide a target for assessing the effectiveness of the school's efforts.

It is important to set realistic goals. Goals need to be both specific and measurable, for example, "By 2012, the school will have real retention rates of seventy per cent from Year 7 to Year 12". Goals need to incorporate student retention, student movement into viable pathways and student connection with their learning. The goals should address not only the work of improving the retention rate, but also of other factors such as reducing truancy, improving NAPLAN scores, and increasing VCAL, VCE or VETiS enrolments and completion. The setting of other goals will depend on the particular problems faced by the school. For example, if attendance is a major problem, then the school may want to set a goal associated with reduced average numbers of absenteeism days.

The discrepancy between the stated goals and the present reality constitutes a precise statement of the problem.
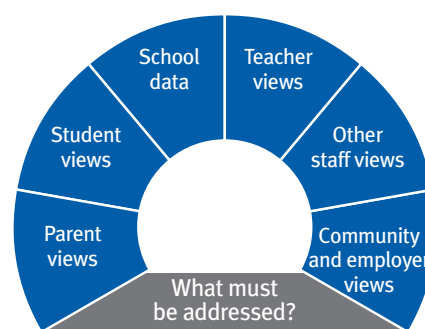
4.3 Identifying student needs

If schools are to effectively meet student needs to increase retention and engagement, they must first accurately identify those needs.

To do this, schools need to analyse carefully a range of data. This can help schools pinpoint which areas most need to be addressed to increase retention.

Who should we listen to?

Keeping students engaged in education and training involves a wide range of people. Teachers, other school staff, parents, students and members of the broader community such as employers may be able to provide useful information on the school's current barriers to improved retention and engagement.

The following are all important sources of information in determining the directions for new programs

4.4 How can we seek feedback?

There are a number of means schools can use to identify particular student needs and places in which provision can be improved:

1. Focus groups:

Schools can gather together a group of people - students, parents, teachers, other school staff, community members - to discuss issues they believe the school faces in retaining students in education. Conducting a focus group of students who have left school prior to completing Year 12 may be particularly useful in identifying unmet student needs. These ex-students may be able to provide valuable information on their reasons for leaving, and what the school may have been able to do to retain them. MIPs coordinators generally maintain contact with school leavers, and could assist in bringing together such a group.

Schools also need to be aware that some of the most at-risk students still at school have very poor literacy levels. As a consequence, they may not fill in written forms of feedback such as checklists or surveys, or may complete them poorly. It may be helpful to conduct focus groups with them, as this can be a better way of gaining feedback from them about their experiences of school. Schools may also need to consider whether surveys or checklists are likely to garner much information

from parents with weak literacy skills, or those whose knowledge of written English is limited. Again, such parents may provide more feedback in a small, informal focus group, especially if appropriate translators can be organised.

Some general advice on how to facilitate focus groups can be found at **http:// www.adm.monash.edu.au/cheq/ support-services/supp-serv-docs/focus-groups.pdf**

2. Surveys:

Conducting surveys can provide information about the school's practices and student responses in a more structured form. Surveys can also generate a reasonably large amount of information on a topic fairly quickly. Surveys can also have the advantage of being anonymous, so if there are sensitive topics, people may feel free to give an honest answer.

3 Checklists:

Like surveys, checklists can provide a relatively large amount of data fairly quickly, and have the advantage of requiring only a small amount of time. Checklists can be useful in determining rapid yes/no responses to questions.

Improving our students' engagement and retention has involved 8 to 10 years of change...but there's a snowball effect: as things improve, the kids and staff become more committed.

Toolbox 1 at the end of the Guide contains a number of surveys and focus group questions that schools may wish to use to determine areas of student need and gaps in provision. There are also some sample focus group questions that schools may find useful in developing data.

4.5 A note on school context

The *Effective Strategies Report* noted that school context is in important factor influencing which strategies are likely to be both appropriate and practical. Small schools may need to employ fewer of the strategies designed to improve connections between the school and its students — strategies such as mini-schools and team-based approaches — given that staff may have strong relationships with students and may have developed a great deal of knowledge about students' concerns and their families.

This is particularly likely to be the case in rural schools that have low staff turnover and a stable local population. Small schools, on the other hand, may have to focus strongly on working with other schools and on cross-sectoral initiatives to manage broad curriculum provision and to offer a good range of VET programs. Large schools, in contrast, may have few difficulties in providing a broad range of programs, but may need to place a strong emphasis on those strategies that foster connections, given that creating strong relationships and deep staff knowledge of students and their problems is most challenging in a large school, especially where there is high staff or student turnover.

5. Planning for improvement

Having identified the strategies the school has in place, along with areas in which student need might be more fully met by the school, the next step is to plan for new strategies and programs to be put in place.

As the team has worked through the data, patterns should have emerged suggesting where improvements might be made in relation to each of the six areas:

1. addressing personal obstacles,
2. catering for diversity,
3. improving connections and support,
4. improving achievement,
5. building responsibility, and
6. improving relevance and tangible outcomes.

How then might schools identify strategies that could help address each of these areas? Improving school culture will impact on all areas of need, and will be considered in more detail in following chapters. Among the school-based and student-focused strategies, there are some that are likely to be particularly relevant to meeting each of these six areas of need. These are outlined below.

1. Addressing personal obstacles

Mini-schools

Cross-sectoral initiatives

Student case management

Creative arts-based programs
for at-risk students

Welfare support

Pathways planning for at-risk students

Mentoring

Programs to improve students' social skills

Targeted financial support

2. Catering for diversity

Broad curriculum provision

Quality VET

Cross-sectoral initiatives

Project-based learning for disengaged students

Creative arts-based programs for
at-risk students

3. Improving connections and support

Careers guidance and pathways planning

Mini-schools

Team-based approaches to teaching,
learning and pastoral care

Priority PD

Community service

Cross-sectoral initiatives

Improving connections with parents

Conflict resolution, problem solving
and mediation

Student case management

Mentoring

Welfare support

Tutoring and peer tutoring

Supplementary or out-of-school-time programs

Programs to improve students' social skills

4. Improving achievement

Challenging and stimulating programs

Literacy and numeracy intervention

Programs to counter low achievement

Strategic use of teachers

Smaller class sizes

Team-based approaches to teaching, learning
and pastoral care

Priority PD

Attendance policies and programs

Targeted assistance for skill development
among low achievers

Tutoring and peer tutoring

Supplementary or out-of-school-time
programs

5. Building responsibility and expectations

Challenging and stimulating programs

Programs to counter low achievement

Priority PD

Community service

Attendance policies and programs

Improving connections with parents

Conflict resolution, problem solving and
mediation

Project-based learning for disengaged
students

6. Improving relevance and outcomes

Broad curriculum provision

Quality VET

Cross-sectoral initiatives

Pathways planning for at-risk students

Project-based learning for disengaged
students

Creative arts-based programs for at-risk
students

Schools first need to identify which additional strategies they wish to put in place. They then need to determine how these may be combined into programs, what resources will be necessary (human, infrastructure and financial), and the order and timeframe for implementation.

Currently, schools develop Annual Implementation Plans (AIPs) as part of their planning for improvement. This plan already includes a section on student engagement, and some schools may wish to expand the Strategic Intent and Implementation pages of this plan to include a section on student retention, and use this to structure their planning efforts. The pro forma for the AIP can be found at **http://www.education.vic.gov.au/ management/schoolimprovement/ accountability/implementation.htm**

Alternatively, the following pro forma can be used by schools to help plan for increased engagement and retention. It is based on the AIP form, but can be used separately.

New Program and description	Strategies used	Resources required	Staff responsible	Timeline	Evaluation
Working together					
Targeted program for at - risk students at Year 8 and 9 involving • Mentoring by a trained community mentor once a fortnight • Homework assistance from the mentor • One planning session with MIPS counsellor once a term	Mentoring Targeted assistance for skill development of low achievers Pathways planning for at-risk students	Mentors from community organisations Informal space for mentors to meet with students Normal careers/MIPS facilities Additional 0.2 MIPS allocation	Jan (Welfare Coordination, liaison with mentors and community organisations, and leadership of program) MIPS co-ordinator	February: identification of potential community organisations to provide mentors. Approach organisations identification or re-organisation of responsibilities to provide additional 0.2 MIPS March-April: Liaise with community organisations, identity potential mentors May: Meet with potential mentors, discuss procedures and responsibilities. Assist mentors to organise police checks.	Tracked individual data on participating students Compare to previous year's retention of the most at-risk students, taking into account any additional factors.

New Program and description	Strategies used	Resources required	Staff responsible	Timeline	Evaluation

Part 2 Implementation of strategies

6. Working to maximise a positive school culture

The first stage of the project identified three sets of strategies: school-wide strategies to improve education for all students, student-focused strategies targeting at-risk students, and a supportive school culture characterised by a shared vision, flexibility and responsiveness, high expectations, continuous improvement, success for all and an emphasis on student autonomy and responsibility.

Creating a school environment that is marked by these qualities is not a straightforward task. However, developing this type of school culture maximises the effectiveness of student-focused and school-wide strategies, increases staff and student wellbeing, and enhances student achievement. Several of the schools in the study had very positive and dynamic cultures, and staff were clear about factors that had contributed to their development.

Staff emphasised that the school leader plays a central role in the development of a strong and positive school culture, provided they are backed by enough other staff to implement change.

"Leadership is central to the culture. The principal's belief in the importance of aspects of culture is vital to achieving it across a school. But on top of this, you need a critical mass of staff, particularly at the leadership level, to support it. Absolutely central to this is needing a group of people who strongly believe in the importance of making a difference in students' lives, and the capacity of the school."

There was a strong emphasis in several of these schools on the importance of professional development for staff. In addition to in-house professional development, all teachers were encouraged to further their formal qualifications.

"When we were first trying to get these changes of the ground, there was almost unlimited access to PD for staff. The principal believed that the most important asset the school has is the individual teacher, the vital thing is to build teacher capacity."

"We really supported teachers professionally. Leading teachers have had funding for further study – fifty percent of our leadership group has done further study. The school also paid for staff to travel interstate and overseas on professional development tours to gain the latest knowledge. We've strongly supported this area."

"To establish a strong culture, you need to provide professional development for the leadership team, to give them the necessary skills."

A number of leadership staff also commented on the need for distributed leadership as a means of allowing staff to "own" changes. In schools with a vibrant culture, teacher knowledge was seen as essential, and in many of these schools, professional development drew heavily on teachers' capacity to learn from one another. There was a very strong emphasis on consultation, and principals stressed the need for an "open door" policy on the part of leadership staff.

In these schools, distributed leadership and consultation included not only teaching staff but also allied staff such as School Support Officers, who were encouraged to contribute to the change process. Schools with strong cultures also recognised the importance of involving students and parents:

"We found it was really important to get students on board via a consultative process and keep them updated with information, especially in upper years."

"We brought on board the School Council. The School Council plays a key leadership role here. It has travelled, visited other schools to be aware of trends. A lot of schools will not use School Councils."

"We targeted parents constantly. Parent teacher meetings were held 4 times per year and they averaged 65% attendance which was pretty impressive. Kids would come and talk about their work."

Openness to new ideas and allowing staff to experiment and follow through on their ideas was also seen as vital. One leading teacher noted that, "The culture has encouraged risk-taking, we encourage people to come up with ideas, we'll take the risk and back it with resources." One dynamic principal worked hard at selecting the right staff, but then gave them a lot of power to try out new ideas and develop new programs. Such principals also emphasized giving staff the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them

"We have a philosophy of encouraging people to take risks, we try not to say no, we let them run with their ideas."

Schools selected staff with great care wherever possible, targeting staff with a passion for their work, and making advanced employment offers if they were able.

"We deliberately head-hunted staff. We searched for staff who would fit with the school philosophy. We would ask potential staff, 'How flexible and innovative are you?'... We spent a lot of time working on recruitment and interviewing staff to ensure they fitted with the culture of the school, and discovered that once staff were at the school, they didn't want to leave."

In several schools with very positive cultures, the induction processes for incoming staff highlighted the culture of the school, rather than just school processes. One principal noted that, "New teachers are told that this is a school that cares for and values the individual".

However, it should also be noted that, even in these schools with very vibrant cultures, there were still a few staff who were less comfortable with aspects of the school philosophy and the changes that had occurred. One principal commented, "[While the staff are very supportive] it's not 100 per cent, it's never 100 per cent".

6.1 Bringing people on board

Schools are complex organisations in which there are often competing ideas, interests and needs among staff, students and the broader school community. To develop this Guide, researchers went back to some of the schools that took part in the first study, schools that had been particularly successful in increasing student engagement and retention in recent years. Leadership and welfare staff at the school were asked how they had worked to bring staff, students and parents on board when shifting the school's direction and provision.

In gaining the support of staff, those in leadership roles had used a range of strategies. One frequently-used strategy was to use data to highlight the need for change. Leaders used the data to make staff aware of the weaker outcomes of some student groups, or the need to improve student achievement levels or student engagement.

"When we started, we began withthe data, which showed us we needed to be changing. We focused on student needs — we were saying,

'It's not about the teachers, it's about the kids and what they need'

Another principal noted,

"It's important to highlight student need to convince staff that change is needed and to take ownership so they will actively participate. We used some of the student feedback data to make staff aware of the need for us to do things differently."

Another commented,

"It's pretty hard to argue when you see the figures. We've used the data to reflect and share and to improve school performance."

One leadership team had used a participatory mechanism for most of the change instituted in the school.

"We've worked on a principle of "energising the front". For each initiative, we call for a volunteer group of teachers, they have a leader, a budget, goals, a timeline, we're clear on decision-making capacity, there is PD along the way."

In this way, staff had ownership of the changes and could volunteer to be part of a group if they wanted to influence the implementation of a given initiative.

Other principals noted the need to try and involve staff who were less favourable about change. One principal said,

"You can work on ' blockers' by valuing them — highlight their skills and try to get them on board by utilising these."

Another principal commented,

"We tried to de-personalise issues by always returning to the strategic plan. Discussion always based on education rather than personal issues."

Others commented that providing information and data on the success of initiatives can be very powerful, as staff can see that changes are bringing about improvement.

Similarly, schools that had successfully implemented change had offered many opportunities for other school community members such as students and parents to influence the direction of the school. Giving people a voice was a powerful way of ensuring that change was owned by the entire community, not just those "at the top".

7. How to implement change: working examples of practice

The *Effective Strategies Report* outlined strategies that are already working to improve student engagement and retention in a number of Victorian government secondary schools.

This section of the Guide provides outlines of particular programs and strategies that were documented in these schools, and how they work. This may help schools as they plan to implement their own strategies. The case studies are organised around the six themes identified earlier:

1. **Promoting student connectedness**
2. **Improving student achievement**
3. **Building student responsibility and raising expectations**
4. **Improving the relevance of what schools offer**
5. **Addressing personal obstacles to staying in school**
6. **Catering for student diversity**

7.1 Promoting student connectedness

In large secondary schools, it can be easy for students to get "lost" in traditional structures where students are taught by many different teachers, and those teachers change with each new school year. Mini-school structures that provide for more familial teaching arrangements were used in many of the schools in the Effective Strategies study.

Schools reported that these structures allowed for the development of much stronger relationships between staff and students, and fostered a much deeper knowledge of students on the part of staff. One school that felt these structures were a major contributor to its high levels of student engagement and retention was Copperfield College in St Albans.
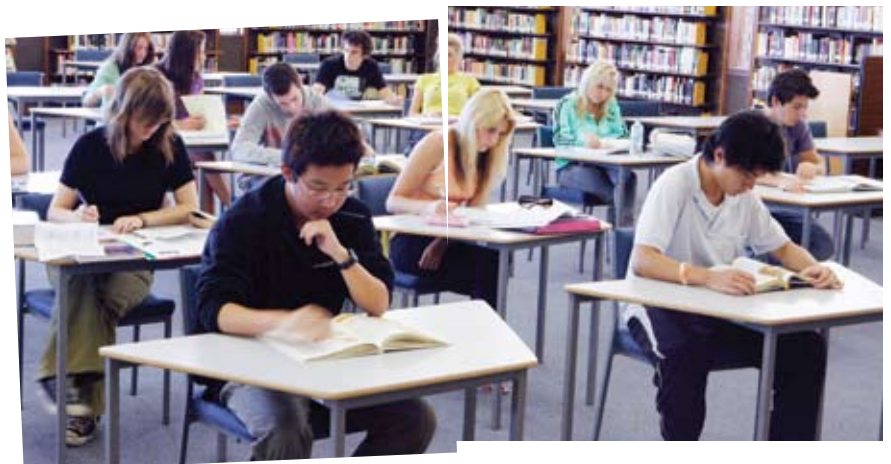
Teams at Copperfield College

The teams at Copperfield College grew out of research conducted by a focus group of staff, who were looking at ways of providing better program delivery for students in the junior years. Staff believed that if the school could lift student outcomes in the earlier years, there would be a flow on to the later years, and they met regularly for eighteen months to explore what might be done.

From the then only junior campus, Year 10 were relocated to the senior campus and four teams of students and staff were formed. Each team comprised two to three classes at each of year levels 7 through 9, together with a number of teachers who would be responsible for teaching the students in their team.

All staff were expected to teach more than one subject to a group of students and teachers were encouraged to stay with a particular group of students for the duration of their time at that campus. In this way teachers developed a much better knowledge of the students and their families, and formed close relationships.

During the planning process it became clear that having each team of students and teachers in the one space would help the system work well. Room allocations were consequently reconfigured so that team staffrooms and classes were located together.

The change was not without its teething problems. Initially, some teachers were concerned about being restricted to a particular age group for up to three years, but now that teachers have seen the results, they are more than happy to support the system. The breadth of the teams has also been modified, with each team now comprising only two year levels: two each of 7/8 and 9/10 teams at the junior campuses, and four 11/12 teams at the senior campus. There is now a second junior campus and Year 10 cannot be accommodated at the senior campus.

While teachers are encouraged to stay with their group of students for the duration of the time they are at that campus, most will spend a maximum of two years with a group of students. Some teachers like to follow a group of students from year 7 though 12, and the school tries to accommodate this if it can.

The approach does have some limitations. The school has found that, because the staffrooms are not subject-based, teachers do not spend as much time with other specialists in their subject area. So it can be more difficult for subject specialists to get together and learn from each other, and teachers need to be diligent about seeking opportunities to work with other specialists in their subject area. However, the staff believes that the benefits of this way of operating far outweigh any drawbacks.

At the senior levels, where students' connections to the school were initially weak, each student was assigned a mentor. Students meet every day as a group after recess with their mentor, who also teaches them for one block. Mentor teachers initially had a pastoral care role as well as being charged with developing study skills in their students. Some teachers, however, felt less well suited to this latter role and so the school now designates a teacher to be in charge of study skills, and extra resources are devoted to providing weekly study skills sessions with all senior students.

Overall the school has found the approach has generated a much greater level of student connectedness, and staff feel they have developed far more effective relationships with students and their parents. Because these relationships are better, problems are identified earlier, and addressed more appropriately. The whole school community benefits.

Building better and more positive connections with students' parents is also vital to increasing student engagement and retention. This can be particularly important with the parents of some of the most at-risk students, who may have had negative experiences of school themselves, or whose contact with their child's school may have mostly been concerning discipline issues. Some of these parents may well view contact with the school as something that casts them as parental "failures" who have not been able to produce the "right" type of child with the "right" type of behaviour.

Building bridges to all parents, but in particular the parents of at-risk students, is an essential part of increasing student achievement and engagement. Ballarat Secondary College has used a number of initiatives to build stronger and more open communication and connections with its parents.

Improving connections with parents: Ballarat Secondary College

Ballarat Secondary College has worked hard to improve the connections between the school, the students, and the home. The school is relatively large - around 1300 students - and is spread across three dispersed campuses. Students also come from a wide range of primary schools, so establishing connections with families can be more challenging than in some other schools.

The school found that parent-teacher interviews were often poorly attended, and felt that it was important both to build better relationships with parents, and to foster students' responsibility for their own learning.

To do this, the school has introduced a range of forms of student-led interviews that have replaced or supplemented traditional parent-teacher interviews. For students in Years 7-10, the first interview in Term 1 is between students, parents and subject teachers, and is more traditional. Following this, students prepare a predictive report outlining what they hope to achieve during the year. In Term 3, the students lead a conversation with their parents and their mentor teacher. In their conversation with their parents and teacher, they focus on the following topics:

- What the student knows and has achieved
- Items of work the student has completed
- Issues they have encountered
- Student successes.

Comparisons with the student's predictive report are also made during the conversation.

At Years 11 and 12 the students undertake PTSCs (Parent Teacher Student Conversations) in which students and parents discuss achievement and options with both pathways and subject teachers. One teacher commented, "Students can identify their positives and develop a successful pathway...the process builds self-esteem".

Leading teachers within the school overview the running process of the program. The school allocates time for mentor teachers to be able to work with students on what the process is and how it works; students spend time rehearsing and practising their interviews. Also, there has been a need to spend time in discussions with staff about what was required, and discussions on how to improve the process.

"Our teachers attend school workshops over a period of 4 days to train up on how to conduct the interview and how they can help students prepare", commented one staff member. "It's an educative process for teachers...there is a manual prepared by the school, and in the 4 weeks leading up to the interviews, there is PD and mentoring for staff".

There is no formal allotment of time for teachers for this process at present, however in 2009 the school will allow between two and three periods a week [for leading teachers] to help them facilitate the process. Not much time is required by management, as most of the work is done at leading teacher meetings, which are held every 3 weeks.

The program is funded through the Student Resource Package, and the main resources purchased for the program have been some digital cameras that students use to take photos for their portfolios. Human resources also need to be committed to the project: the school indicated that the following were put in place to maximise effectiveness:

- Time for teachers to work with students to prepare students' work for interviews.
- Time for teaching and learning leaders to coordinate the program.
- Time for mentor teachers to spend with students in a group and individually.

Ballarat Secondary College believes that there are many benefits to the program. The school has reported an increase in parent attendance at these interviews from around 30 per cent, to around 80 per cent. As one staff member noted,

"It helps students feel good about themselves, they have more control over what they are doing. It builds aspirations for kids through achievable goals and through the celebration of their success. Some of the students with lower achievement levelshave been able to identify areas where they have been successful, and this is really empowering. The meetings help highlight the positives and the possible alternative pathways for students, and get parents involved in their child's education."

Finally, building better links to organisations in the broader community can foster students' skills and knowledge, and can help them see why continuing their education is important. Working with community organisations can also be used to improve students' confidence and increase their aspirations. Work between Western Port College, in Hastings, and the Beacon Foundation has achieved these goals.

Working with community organisations: Western Port College and the Beacon Foundation

Western Port Secondary College has worked with the Beacon Foundation to provide a much more extensive careers program and improve the engagement and outcomes of its students.

The Beacon Foundation is a national not-for-profit organisation seeking to help young people develop viable pathways and goals. The Beacon Foundation works to initiate innovative projects that model solutions to youth unemployment and encourage self-help at the local level. Projects are supported by business and local communities.

Initially the leadership team at Western Port Secondary School visited Brooks High School in Tasmania to see the Beacon Program in action. Western Port saw links between that school's situation and their own.

Western Port felt that the reputation of the school and its students among industries in the area could be improved, and that its students often had difficulty obtaining employment within the area or accessing tertiary studies. Many of the students were at risk of not completing secondary school and of not being prepared for employment.

The school wanted to work to make their students first-choice employees for the local industries. They found that large local employers like BHP Steel Readymix and Bluescope Steel did not choose their students for employment even though they were locals. The school has attempted to remedy this by being more connected to business and listening to what business want from prospective employees via the Beacon Program.

The Program has also changed levels of aspiration among the students, who now believe they can go on to university or find meaningful employment.

Through the Beacon Program the school fosters links with the business and education communities. It works by giving students a "bright futures" focus. The school runs programs that will engage students and keep them at school whilst skilling them and making them ready for work or further study. Students undertake extensive careers development work that includes broadening their knowledge of the work environment, practising for job interviews, resume writing, deportment and general appearance and presentation for employment.

To get all this happening, the school developed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Beacon Foundation. It also commits to continuous improvement of the program. Members of the school senior body attend state and national Beacon conferences.

As part of the program students also agree to sign a pledge or charter stating that they will plan their futures and think about what they can do to have the best possible success after school. They agree to undertake any task that will help them find and enhance a pathway into further education or employment.

Western Port has invited local business to attend and support the school. A business breakfast organised to celebrate the "Bright Futures, No Dole" program at the school was attended by 100 members of the local community. At this breakfast members were invited to offer support in a variety of ways to assist the students at the school.

The school has run programs such as the Big Day Out where students travel by bus to attend an industry or educational institution that interests them. Western Port also holds a Girls Day Out to help Year 11 girls consider non-traditional career paths. Female guest speakers discuss their work, and the students work on presentation and interview skills with the speakers. There is a Job Ready day in Year 10 where students develop their job interview skills and prepare for aptitude tests for apprenticeships, with mock interviews following in the next few weeks before an interview panel.

Western Port feels that "...the Beacon Program is not magic but it gives us an umbrella to work within." One staff member is the designated Beacon Coordinator who coordinates the program and liaises between the school, local business and the Beacon Foundation. In its first year in the Beacon Program the School won the state award for best new Beacon School and in the second year it won a national award for best new Beacon school.

What's needed to run the program? Western Port found that the program works most effectively with an SSO to assist and oversee organisational matters. They also commented,

"Regular metings to evaluate what's working and what isn't are essential. Linking up with schools that are already undertaking the program is another great way to get things off the ground."

7.2 Improving student achievement

As noted in the *Effective Strategies Report*, low levels of student achievement are strongly associated with early school leaving. Furthermore, if low achievers leave school, they tend to suffer worse long-term outcomes than early leavers with higher levels of achievement. So programs to improve student achievement are essential to increasing student retention, and to providing better outcomes where students choose to leave.

Schools in challenging settings often have to contend with larger numbers of students with low levels of achievement. Low achievement in literacy is a particular concern, as it impacts heavily on students' capacity to access the rest of the curriculum while still at school, and can have a very negative impact on the quality of their lives on completing their education. For these reasons, Copperfield College has implemented a literacy program for all students in Years 7 and 8 to raise the levels of students' literacy skills.

Improving literacy levels: Copperfield College

Staff at Copperfield College had realised that student literacy levels were having a negative impact on student learning in a whole range of subjects. Local LLEN members had also indicated that students' skills were impacting on their capacity to access opportunities beyond school. Over sixty per cent of students were entering the school with reading skills below the expected levels. In response to these concerns, the school developed a literacy program to raise students' skills in this area.

The school brought in literacy expert Carol Christensen to conduct professional development with all staff. All Year 7 and 8 teachers at the school are trained in literacy teaching and required to teach literacy, and all Year 7 and 8 students have four periods of literacy classes each week .

Copperfield uses the ACER PAT tests to assess students' literacy skills, and the results of these tests determine the literacy group in which a student is placed. Students with the weakest skills are placed in a class with a focus on decoding, those at the next level are classed as transition and work on a range of skills, the third group has a focus on comprehension, while students with the strongest skills focus on critical literacy and meta-cognition.

There is a skewing of class size according to student skill levels - the decoding groups have only eight students, there are 12 in transition classes, 15 in comprehension classes and the critical literacy groups are a more standard class size.

The school designates two of its staff as literacy coaches, and these staff have participated in Western Region literacy training, as well as having completed the Carol Christensen professional development. The school also draws on the expertise of a Western Region literacy consultant, who works closely with the teachers. The College is currently considering whether to extend the program into Year 9, although additional literacy classes are already offered to a small group of the very weakest Year 9 students.

Staff and student responses to the program have been very positive, and students say the increased skills improve their learning in other subjects. The program also appears to have had a positive impact on student self esteem, especially with the weakest students, who now feel they have the chance to achieve more across the curriculum.

Supplementary or out-of-school time programs can be useful in raising student achievement. A number of schools offer lunchtime and after hours homework clubs to help students with their work. Brimbank College is one such school.

Homework club: Brimbank College

Brimbank College enrols students from a very diverse range of backgrounds, including a significant number from refugee and immigrant families. As a consequence, some parents do not have the English language skills to assist their children with homework. In other cases, parents have limited education themselves, or may be working long hours to support the family, and can be frustrated at being unable to help.

In recognition of these problems, the school developed a Homework Help program, which has now been running for a number of years. A session for students in Years 7-9 is run on Mondays from 3:30 to 4:30, while sessions for students in Years 10-12 are offered on Tuesday and Wednesday lunchtimes and after school. Attendance is voluntary, and around 20 students attend each session.

The program aims not just to assist but also to challenge students - Year 9 students may also be offered Year 10 work, and much is done to extend the students in later years.

The program is staffed by the school's teachers - the school has developed a local agreement with its teachers and the club forms part of staff's allotment of "other duties" for the week. Expert teachers are required to take one session as part of their responsibilities.

As part of the program, the school also conducts an out-of-hours technology class incorporating woodwork and sheet metalwork. A vertical class available to students across year levels, it is popular and well-attended.

The school believes the program is working well, and has contributed to a more achievement focused school culture, but would like to further increase the number of students attending. Parents' shiftwork can mean that a number of the school's students are required to care for younger siblings after school, and can't make after-school sessions. Brimbank is currently investigating ways of expanding the program to improve achievement among a greater cross-section of students.

Another central means of raising student achievement is decreasing absenteeism. Students who miss a great deal of school inevitably achieve less than they might have, and when large numbers of students are away, teachers cannot cover the curriculum.

The DEECD initiative *It's not OK to Be Away* was designed to reduce student absenteeism. Brimbank College has reduced its student absences to around six days per year, well below the state average for secondary schools. Here's how they achieved this:

Reducing student absenteeism: Brimbank College

Staff at Brimbank Secondary College knew that students can't learn if they're not at school. Absence rates were high, and teachers were frustrated at trying to cover the curriculum with so many students away each day. Improving student attendance was going to be vital if student achievement rates were to be lifted.

Using the DEECD initiative, *"It's not OK to be away"*, as a starting point, the school poured considerable time, energy and focus into lifting student attendance and increasing punctuality. The results are impressive – student absences have dropped from an average of 22 days per year to 6 days, well below the state mean. The school has achieved these results working with a very diverse student population – over fifty languages are spoken by students at home – and in an area that sometimes experiences considerable challenges.

Brimbank started by developing multilingual pamphlets and an attendance folder with information for parents and students. The school implemented a parent hotline for student absences, and students were given a fridge magnet displaying the number for parents to ring. They began a system of rewards for high attendance that includes frequent certificates for students with low absences, and even excursions.

The importance of attending school is featured during the school's Attendance Week in Term 4. The staff even have special *"It's not OK to be away"* T-shirts that they wear every Friday to make sure the message gets through.

At the class level, every day each teacher records attendance on their laptop at the beginning of class, using "Rollmark" software. This enables the college to know class by class throughout the day if a student has not presented. The software also allows staff to print out a record for the whole day for any student. Staff at the school emphasised that the success of the program depends on the commitment of every teacher to fill in these computer records.

Central to the success of the program has been the work of the Attendance Officer, who is employed 0.5 in the role. She is a qualified social worker, and has promoted the program and been proactive with students and families. She has met frequently with families, support them to resolve a range of issues, particularly in relation to student attendance, and she follows up with parents whenever a student is away. She has also conducted workshops with students to help them feel better connected to the school. In addition to the Attendance Officer, other staff are given some time to follow up on absences.

To raise expectations of students, the college implemented a 90 per cent attendance requirement which students must meet to pass a subject. There are redemption classes at lunchtime and after school on Mondays and Tuesdays in which students can make up missed classes. Teachers are required to provide meaningful work for students to complete during redemption classes – one of the lessons the school learnt along the way was that if redemption classes are seen as an "easy" option, some students will choose these instead of attendance.

Brimbank has also tried to be proactive in improving attendance by organising to meet with students at risk and their parents to provide support and discuss issues impacting on attendance. The school tries to keep these meetings relaxed, accessible and informal.

Follow up on student absences does require a commitment from staff across the school, and Brimbank has also found that the system can be difficult for new CRTs to adapt to. However, the benefits have been found to be worth the effort. Staff feel that the whole culture around attending school has changed – both students and parents know that attendance is essential, and this is reflected in much stronger student outcomes.

7.3   Building student responsibility and raising expectations

The *Effective Strategies* study found that secondary schools that have improved student engagement and retention have worked to build the level of responsibility students have and to raise expectations of students. This communicates to students that staff have faith in their capabilities and further prepares students for approaching adulthood.

Over the last 10 years, Carwatha College P-12 has developed and implemented a Year 9 Community Leadership program undertaken by all students in Year 9. The program gives students very significant roles and responsibilities in a number of community events held at the school. The staff believe this program has led to significant increases in student self-confidence and engagement with school, which in turn have contributed to the school's excellent retention rate. The program is described below.

Creating opportunities for student ownership: Carwatha College P-12

Together with academic success and personal growth, development of students' leadership skills is considered a key objective of the educational program at Carwatha College P-12, a Prep to 12 school in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Several years ago the school began a Community Leadership Program with Year 9 students, with the aim of building responsibility and expectations among the students. It was anticipated that a program which was both challenging and stimulating would lead to more active engagement among students and improve retention rates at later years.

The program is conducted over 12 weeks and is integrated into the English program across seven 75-minute periods per fortnight. The program grew from a number of different programs, including a girls' leadership program and a program for at-risk boys, and is now run for the entire Year 9 cohort. Team building exercises are devised together with training in leadership and teamwork. Excursions as well as incursions are also part of the program.

Students are trained to do coaching through sport and then devise and deliver a program to the College's primary students. The students are required to keep a weekly journal and to make a final assessment of their program.

The initial emphasis of the program was on sports but this has now broadened to include other activities. Literacy tasks are built in along the way and much emphasis is also placed on learning from one's mistakes.

The program culminates in a large community fair for the primary school. Every stage is negotiated with the students who then drive the process from planning and funding through to advertising and running the fair on the day. This requires a great deal of team work. "They just love it," said the principal "and everyone does something that is out of their comfort zone. There's an emphasis on everyone being involved - on the day of the final event, we don't let them go home!"

The finale to the program is a concert for the parents. The students also plan and organise this event, building the sets and giving group presentations on their work. All the students are presented with a certificate and a medallion to celebrate their success. "The students all develop skills from the program. It is now an accepted part of what happens and is embedded into the English program."

The Office for Youth supports the program through providing funding through its Advance program, and the school works in partnership with the Greater Dandenong Community Health Service.

The main challenge for the program is maintaining of group of committed staff to keep it running. "It requires a lot of extra effort from the teachers," said the principal, "but we have enough core staff to carry it on from year to year…it is now part of the school, part of what's done."

7.4 Improving the relevance of what schools offer

Some students may not be engaged by theoretically based or exam oriented curriculum. Such curricula require students to place immense trust in schools and teachers, and provide them with little in the way of immediate feedback on their own learning, or concrete evidence of achievement. They may be particularly problematic for the most at-risk students, who can see them as lacking any connection to their needs or goals.

One central means of improving student engagement and retention can be to increase the relevance of what schools offer students. Strategies such as project-based learning allow students to experience success and provide a tangible outcome for learning. Similarly, creative arts-based programs offer students learning that incorporates intrinsic rewards. Vocationally-oriented programs and courses can link directly with students' goals for the future.

Project-based Learning: Western Port Secondary College

As an accredited sustainable school, Western Port Secondary School in Hastings developed its Kitchen Garden Project/Outdoor Classroom with the aim of improving health, well-being and educational outcomes for both the school and the wider community. From its beginnings in 2004 the Garden Project has since expanded to involve all year levels in hands-on activities which provide tangible outcomes for the students.

For several years prior to the implementation of the Garden Project the College had been involved in several environmentally-oriented initiatives. With its interest in becoming a sustainable school Western Port began the process of developing an Outdoor Classroom. It began by researching similar programs, looking for proven models, and then formed a committed planning group from interested staff, ensuring that a range of expertise was represented.

This group developed a project outline which included a rationale and goals to reflect school priorities and address areas for improvement. After seeking endorsement from key groups within the school as well as key stakeholders within the broader community, the planning group sourced funding from the school budget and external seeding grants. Expressions of interest were sought for staffing the new program and the project roll-out was planned, with key staff responsible for the timetable and staffing. The detailed proposal was presented to School Council for endorsement and finally the Project was publicised to the broader school community.

In addition to core funding from both the school budget, grants from DEECD's Access to Excellence initiative and from the School Focused Youth Services enabled the College to employ a coordinator for $2^1/_2$ days a week. His background is in horticulture, and his main role has been to oversee the hands-on side of the Outdoor Classroom. He works with staff and small groups of students to initiate and implement projects, and is a valued source of advice.

Mini projects involving various year levels have included:

- A design for the garden developed by Year 9 graphics students
- The 'Hilton Henhouse', an octagonal henhouse designed and constructed by Years 11 and 12 VCAL students
- An outdoor brick and adobe oven constructed by the Year 10 alternative mathematics class
- A medieval herb and medicinal garden researched, designed and planted by Year 8 SOSE students and
- An outdoor lounge room featuring cement-rendered recycled furniture constructed by Year 9 art students.

Western Port has also created the position of sustainability coordinator within the school, which gives a time allowance to the teacher who takes on this role. The sustainability coordinator is able to assist other staff in developing their skills, and is able to liaise with other providers. The sustainability coordinator works on projects with students in conjunction with other staff, allowing for more one-to-one assistance.

Although the project is working very well, one issue the school has encountered is continuity - as staff change teaching areas and students change year levels, it becomes more difficult to complete some projects and maintain others. The school is working on means to improve continuity and ensure students gain the sense of achievement that comes from successful project completion.

The project has impacted directly on approximately a third of the school community and a fifth of staff over the last two years. Student opinion data has shown a significant improvement in students' connectedness to school and community, and the school believes this is linked to the implementation of the project. Staff across the school believe the project has resulted in increased attendance rates, better relationships with peers and teachers, and improvements in engagement and learning.

Another school that has worked to provide a more practical program for at-risk students has been Mt Clear College in Ballarat. Two of the initiatives developed by the school to improve the relevance of school and provide real tangible outcomes for some of its students are the Practical and Applied Learning program (PAL) and the Real Life Experiential and Applied Learning Program (REAL). These alternative programs are designed to cater for students with significant welfare needs, those struggling with a more traditional curriculum, and those showing significant signs of disengagement.

Practical and Applied Learning (PAL) and Real Life Experiential and Applied Learning (REAL): Mount Clear College, The PAL program

The PAL program began at Mount Clear six years ago, and is taught by a small team of committed staff. The program caters for around 20 students in each of Years 7, 8 and 9. It targets those students who enter the school at Year 7 with the lowest literacy and numeracy skills and who are therefore at risk of becoming disengaged. Some of these students narrowly fail to meet the criteria for disability funding, and struggle to manage the mainstream curriculum. Before the PAL program, these students were often identified with behaviour problems in Years 8 and 9, with significant numbers drifting away from school at Year 10.

Many students also have major language disorders, and some students have high welfare needs. The PAL program provides real support, structure and stability for these students and their families.

The program uses a "hands-on" approach to numeracy and draws on materials from the "First Steps" literacy program from Western Australia. To improve students' basic skills, more class time is allocated to literacy and numeracy in PAL than in the mainstream program.

The curriculum is purpose-built and runs for three years. The program provides for better relationships by limiting the number of staff teaching students: there is a small number of core teaching staff - three at each year level to cover literacy, numeracy and integrated studies - and teachers remain with a group of students as them move from Year 7 through to Year 9. Students do some classes, such as physical education, with mainstream students.

As part of the program, Year 9 students visit a number of community organisations and undertake voluntary work such as listening to students read at a primary school. These activities improve their community awareness and build students' self-confidence.

The PAL program appears to have significantly increased the achievement and engagement of these students. Attendance levels are high, and this group of students scored highest of all groups on school satisfaction in the student survey. They also have the highest attendance rates at school events such as the swimming sports and the annual College Festival.

The REAL Program

This is an alternative program (Real Life Experiential Applied Learning Program) designed to engage at-risk students. The College began the program 7 years ago, and there are currently 22 students enrolled. The program was introduced to the school after staff found that there were particular groups of students for whom connectedness to school plummeted at Year 8. These students also tended to exhibit behavioural problems. Students who are showing signs of disengagement - poor attendance, behavioural issues and so on - are invited to apply towards the end of Year 8.

The program has 4 core subjects: Literacy, Numeracy, Business Enterprise/Community Projects (which are completed off-campus) and Personal Development, which involves activities to build teamwork skills and self-confidence. Students also complete Year 9 electives with mainstream students. The curriculum emphasises hands-on activities and job preparedness: the program includes 2 VET certificates: Certificate I in Vocational Education and Certificate I in First Aid, and also incorporates one day a week at Ballarat Learning Exchange to do multimedia projects.

Initially the school developed its own curriculum for the program, but has found since that the VET modules give the program more structure, and offer students something that can be of real value beyond school.

Mount Clear staff stressed the importance of selecting teachers who are able to work well with at-risk students. Most of the funding for the program comes from the student Resource Package, but there are additional costs for attending the Ballarat Learning Exchange, and for purchasing the TAFE courses and materials.

The program is working well to retain students who in many instances would have dropped out at the first opportunity. The school regularly uses information from student focus groups and surveys to make sure the program is meeting student needs.

Central to the success of both programs has been identifying the right teachers to teach the program. Teacher flexibility, with a capacity to be both tolerant and firm, is seen as essential.

7.5. Addressing personal obstacles to staying in school

Outstanding teaching programs and broad subject offerings will have little impact on retaining students if the major obstacles to remaining at school are not school-related. Where there is a strong need in the family for additional income, for example, or the student is struggling to cope with living independently, schools will need to consider other forms of strategic support.

Coordinated approaches to welfare may be important in schools where students are facing a range of substantial welfare problems. One such approach, developed by Mt Clear College, is working to help at-risk students remain in education.

Coordinated welfare approaches: Mount Clear College

Mount Clear College, on the outskirts of Ballarat, has a large percentage of its 1100 students receiving EMA. Its approach to student health and welfare has changed in recent years in response to concerns that its services were not meeting student needs.

Until a few years ago welfare support was delivered within mini-schools, with staff given time allowances for this role. But the underlying causes were not being adequately addressed. Staff were "just putting out fires," as one staff member described it. It was also felt that students were reluctant to access welfare services for fear of being stigmatised as students in need.

The school has now adopted a whole-school delivery model whereby health, welfare, counselling and careers have been consolidated into one service called SHAAC: Student Health And Advice on Careers. The service is staffed by a fulltime nurse as coordinator, a student counsellor and a careers/VET coordinator, with another nurse employed on a half-time basis. A general practitioner consults at the service half a day a week, providing referrals and supervising mental health plans. These staff are located in the one space.

To make the service more accessible and attractive, the school created a separate user-friendly space by adding new, couches, coffee and tea facilities and private consulting rooms. The whole area was also given a fresh coat of paint. The students were also asked to name the program as a way to take ownership and remove the welfare stigma. The school also feels that using non-teaching staff helps students relate better to the service and that they respond to the range of professional expertise.

SHAAC coordinates a range of programs either as whole-school activities or as activities targeting particular year levels. Some of these programs are run in conjunction with external agencies, including Red Cross and the Uniting Church. Red Cross runs a mentor program in which mentors come to the school once a week to run activities for selected students, and the Uniting Church runs an activity program for female students with low self-esteem. A breakfast club runs weekly for about 80 students and a teenage pregnancy experience program has been implemented for Year 10 students. Through a program called Smart Ask students attend a local nightclub for sessions with representatives from

the police, ambulance and nightclub owners on such issues as drugs and alcohol, street safety and how to care for friends. SHAAC staff also form a point of connection with a range of other external agencies.

The SHAAC service coordinates the case management of suspended students, and this has been found to be very effective. Prior to being accepted back into the school, suspended students are required to participate in a reflection process with SHAAC staff. Teachers have observed a decline in "repeat offending" as well as a decline in the number of suspensions overall.

SHAAC has also had carriage of several small projects to re-engage at risk students. "Railtrail" is one such project in which young male students work with an energy company to carry out activities such as fencing, landscaping and shed building. Students learn practical skills as well as completing a first aid certificate.

Since the adoption of the new model students are seeking assistance in greater numbers with an unexpected demand for referrals to mental health services to deal with issues such as depression, self harm, anger management and family violence.

While SHAAC is funded primarily through the school budget, other funding has also been sourced. Equipment for the GP clinic was paid for from an Austar community award grant, while the GP's services are bulkbilled to Medicare. The breakfast club is sponsored by the Construction Union with provisions donated by a local bakery, and the Railtrail program receives funds from Juvenile Justice.

The school still sees the need to forge stronger links between SHAAC staff and the teaching staff, and feels community awareness of what SHAAC does for students could be further raised. However, the overall view at Mt Clear Secondary is that concentrating the resources in one place adds to the strength of this model of welfare coordination. It is seen as being accessible to students at all times, and is run by a strong and supportive team who have developed excellent relationships with community and government agencies.

Mentoring is another strategy that may provide at-risk students with the advice and support they need to complete their education. Traralgon Secondary College has implemented one such program targeted at students at risk of early leaving.

Mentoring for at-risk students: Traralgon Secondary College

Students with significant personal or academic problems can need additional personal support to help them remain connected to education. Recognising this to be so, Traralgon Secondary College has developed a mentoring program for its at-risk students in Year 8.

The program is called the Plan-it Youth Program. Potential participants are identified by teachers, but also can be nominated by parents, and some students nominate themselves. There are two intakes of 8-10 students per year who take part in a mentoring scheme. This involves a trained mentor who will focus on careers, assist with school work, and discuss self esteem and family issues. Students are taken out of class for 2 hours a week for the semester. Mentors have included a wide range of community members.

The school has used grants provided by the LLEN, the Office of Youth, and by TAFE to establish and run the program.

One constant challenge for the program is the need to identify disengaged students to participate with care, given the limited number of places. One staff member noted that, "Staff need to pick students well and this is not always easy". It requires consistent effort and thought by the staff to ensure that they identify not only those students who present with behavioural issues, but also those who may be disengaged but causing no difficulties in class. Staff also felt that having a dedicated space for the program is important, and fosters better relationships between students and mentors.

The school believes the program has had a positive impact by "getting in early" with disaffected students. The staff note, "The program builds confidence, self esteem and enables specific strategies to be applied to students at risk of disengaging from school life. In addition the program brings the community into the school."

Funding and other support for the program comes from a variety of sources. The program was initially established with and is maintained by Commonwealth funds, together with externally-funded scholarships from the Felton Bequest and one-off grants from the Office of Youth. Maintaining funding for this intensively-resourced program nevertheless remains a challenge and Traralgon Secondary has needed be proactive in identifying a range of funding sources.

Traralgon also provides a business administrator for the program and draws on an extensive community network of service providers for support and advice. The social workers employed by the College use their professional networks extensively to broaden the school's relationships well beyond the more traditional education network.

7.6 Catering for student diversity

Schools that have increased student engagement and retention know that a one-size education most definitely does not fit all. Schools in the study had implemented a range of initiatives to meet the needs of particular groups of students within the school.

Retention rates for Indigenous students are relatively low and schools with Indigenous students need to consider options for programs to assist these students to remain in education. The Koorie Engagement Program (KEP) at Traralgon Secondary College is one such program. Staff believe it has been an important tool in lifting the engagement and retention of Koorie students at the school.

Koorie Engagement Program: Traralgon Secondary College

Traralgon Secondary College has a strong focus on student welfare and runs a range of programs aimed at improving student engagement and retention. Among in these is the Koorie Engagement Program, which runs at the school's junior campus. Approximately 40 students, identified through AIM data and teacher referrals, are currently taking part in the program which entails weekly sessions consisting of two students at a time meeting with one staff member for extra tuition as well as welfare support.

Along with the support of the principal and leadership team, a key ingredient in the success of this program is community support. Before commencing the program the College fostered links with the local Koorie community, making school space available for meetings by Koorie elders. The program has also benefited from the active engagement of the Local Aboriginal Consultative Committee. Relationships are fostered through different community events and an annual meeting with the whole Koorie community. As a consequence of these relationships Traralgon has been able to employ Koorie educators who are well-known to the community. The College also keeps up ongoing, consistently applied contact with the students' families who, according to one report, "just love the program."

Another factor in the program's success is the high level of resourcing. Four specialist staff are dedicated to the program: two Koorie non-teaching staff and two qualified teachers, who are freed up from other extra duties so that they can devote maximum time to the students. The school nurse and chaplain, as well as the two social workers on staff, also provide valuable support.

As part of the program, students also attend a homework club which runs sessions once a week in the evening and provides intensive literacy support in small groups or one-on-one. Students are provided with a meal as part of the Homework program and a pick up and drop off bus service is offered. A qualified teacher runs the program. "It works," said one staff member. "The kids turn up in the evening, do well and they're happy." It appears that students find a sense of community at the school on those evenings. "They come here to connect", noted another staff member.

Also integral to the success of the program is the use of the Berry Street mentoring model. Training for mentors is provided by the local TAFE and supported by the Gippsland Mentoring Alliance, with mentors drawn from the local community. Mentors include retired teachers, community police, youth workers and young mums.

Catering for diverse student needs can be more difficult in small schools, which are more restricted by the number of staff and students in terms of the breadth of subjects they can offer. Birchip P-12 has worked in a number of different ways to provide rural students with as much subject choice as possible.

Broad provision in a small rural setting: Birchip P-12 School

Birchip P-12 School, 320 km north-west of Melbourne on the southern edge of the Mallee, draws its 215 students from a township population of 900 and an area population of 1,200. As a small rural school, Birchip faces the challenge of offering and managing a broad provision of programs to a diverse range of students within a finite budget.

The teachers and support staff number 40, including the principal and assistant principals, all of whom have significant teaching loads. To offer a wide range of subjects at VCE level, the school first canvasses both students and parents in order to determine subject preferences. Seventeen VCE subjects are currently offered to a cohort of 41 students, a range which has attracted students from other schools. Technology helps - students from a school 65 km away are taught chemistry with the Birchip students via video conferencing.

Other providers are also important. The school encourages VET and sets aside a day a week for participation in the VET program. Many students undertake VET through TAFE provision at Horsham - a long day, given the round bus trip is over 200 kilometres.

While key subjects such as English and mathematics options are available at the school each year, other subjects such as agriculture and horticulture, IT and psychology are offered in two year cycles, that is, in Year 11 followed by Year 12. In addition, students in Year 11 might study 7 subjects, one of which will be a Year 12 subject, so that they can undertake the range of subjects they want. The school also encourages Year 10 students to "taste" a VCE subject. Some students complete up to three Unit 1 and 2 subjects at Year 10 and go on to choose a Unit 3 and 4 subject at Year 11. Most students leave the school with 6 VCE subjects. Many students leave with three certificates: VCE, VCAL and VET.

Most classes are combined across two and sometimes three year levels. At VCE, Year 11 and 12 students are combined for English and literature, and for subjects which have a strong practical component such as agriculture and horticulture.

Maintaining this type of broad provision requires additional resources and the school has worked hard to attract additional funds by applying for grants from a wide range of sources. The school also places a great deal of emphasis on recruitment: principal John Richmond is sure that striving to appoint staff who are both flexible and multi-skilled helps the school offer students a quality education with a lot of choice. The school ensures each student has an individual learning plan with appropriate future pathways considered. The school believes that all these factors have contributed to its strong retention figures.

Catering for diverse student needs also means catering for those students for whom the traditional academic course holds little relevance. While VCAL has helped meet the needs of these students in their senior years, what can schools do for these students prior to Years 11 and 12? Here's one school's answer:

Alternative Pathways Program: Epping Secondary College

For some students, a traditional academic program holds little appeal. What can schools do before VCAL for those students whose interests do not align with standard academic offerings?

Epping Secondary College in the north of Melbourne had spent some time considering these questions. Their answer was to implement a special program for these students at Year 10. For the past nine years the college has run an alternative "Pathways" program to address the needs of students wanting to explore a range of pathways.

To enter the program, students have to formally apply. The program is popular - around 35 to 40 students apply, of whom around 25 gain admission. Successful admission is based on

- The career pathway focus of the student,
- Staff assessment of students' self-esteem, and whether the program might assist in improving or further developing this,

- Staff assessment of the individual needs of the student at this point in time, and whether an academic or an applied learning choice is appropriate, and
- The interest students have demonstrated in sampling different career paths.

The program focuses on students who are showing signs of disengagement, and has four main components. Students do intensive literacy and numeracy work, there is a personal development and welfare component, a component that focuses on health, physical education and drama, and a work-related component in which students do work experience, training or both. Around ninety per cent of students complete a VET certificate.

What does the school see as central to the program's success? The leadership team noted that the first ingredient of success is to carefully select staff with the right attitude to work on the program, staff with a strong drive to meet the needs of at-risk students. The program is also housed in a

separate area of the school and the staff believe that separate space with several rooms helps the initiative function well, and gives students an identity as part of a "special" program. Community support is also vital, and the school has needed to tap into strong local networks, particularly for the community service component. The school also aims to take a mix of students into the program, including some who are academically very capable, but looking for an alternative pathway, and believes this mix impacts positively on the tone of the group. Finally, genuine support from the School Council and the principal and a belief in the importance of the program are fundamental to giving the program a real status and profile in the school.

The program has always operated within the school SRP budget - class sizes are 25 and staff take on the program within their normal teaching load. Providing this type of program appears to have helped less academic students develop their skills and remain in school, and most move into the school's VCAL program at Year 11.

8. Evaluating progress

After the school has developed and implemented strategies to improve student engagement and retention, a challenge remains to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs and whether or not they are working in the ways that were planned. To do this, schools will need to consider again the range of data available to them, and aim to evaluate programs in the short and longer term.

Changes related to the implementation of strategies may need to be measured beyond traditional indicators and include consideration of personal development for students including things such as adaptability, engagement in learning, work attitudes, interpersonal skills, planning and working skills, and competencies. These more indirect features may be important outcomes to consider in evaluating impact.

Ideally, the team of people who were responsible for the initial assessment of the school's provision and the development of the programs and strategies the school has implemented will have carriage of program evaluation. It may also be very useful to include students and parents on the evaluation team to ensure a variety of perspectives.

One important way in which schools may wish to evaluate program effectiveness is to list programs, together with a range of measures and additional factors that may be impacting on success, as a tool to determine program effectiveness. Schools will need to consider the following types of data in evaluating program effectiveness:

- Student retention rates
- Student engagement data from DEECD surveys
- Quality of Teaching surveys
- NAPLAN Results (remembering that weak achievement is a key risk factor for early leaving) and the degree to which the school value adds over this period
- Successful VCE, VET and VCAL completion rates
- Absenteeism and lateness rates and
- Student post-school pathways information from MIPs coordinators.

Each of these measures will provide an indicator of different aspects of students' involvement with school. The following table may help schools in determining which measures may be useful in assessing different domains. For most of these measures, the evaluation will involve estimating changes over time; in the case of student achievement, change over time in the degree to which the school is value adding is a central measure.

Domain	Relevant measures
Student achievement:	NAPLAN data
	AIM data
	School-based data including VELS data
	Supplementary tests such as those provided by ACER
	VASS data
	VCE, VCAL and VET completion rates
	VCE, VCAL and VET achievement rates
Student retention	Real retention rates (taking into account student movement into viable pathways such as apprenticeships)
Student engagement	Student engagement data from DEECD surveys
	Quality of Teaching surveys
	Student absenteeism rates
	Student rates of lateness
	School-generated data (focus groups, surveys, informal discussions)
Student pathways	Information from MIPs coordinators
	On Track data

Considering each of these domains – achievement, retention, engagement and pathways will give the school an overall picture of how well its combination of strategies and programs is working to improve provision.

In addition, the school needs to evaluate the effectiveness of each of the programs it has implemented. To do this, the evaluation team needs to develop some specific questions concerning each program, then identify or develop data that will allow the question to be answered. So, for example, with regard to a project-based learning program for at-risk students, the team may wish to ask, :

- "Does the program increase the engagement of our most at-risk students?
- "Has the program helped increase the number of at-risk students staying on beyond Year 10?"
- "Has the program allowed these students to further clarify future pathways?"
- "Has the program increased students' generic skills and competencies (for example, self-organisation skills)?"

A program evaluation proforma and example can be found on page 51 to assist schools with this task.

Program Evaluation Proforma

Program and strategies	Target groups	Evaluation questions	Potential data to use	Factors potentially impacting on success
Literacy for All Years 7 and 8 **Strategies:** Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy growth Targeted assistance for skill development among low achievers Tutoring and peer tutoring	All students, but with a particular intensive focus on students with very weak literacy skills	1. Has the program improved achievement across the board in literacy? 2. Is the program lifting achievement levels for low-achieving students? 3. Is the program helping low-achieving students access other areas of the curriculum? 4. Have there been changes in student engagement and participation that may be due to improved literacy skills?	NAPLAN data AIM data Feedback from students (short survey or informal focus group) Feedback from other staff ((short survey or informal discussion) Student engagement data from DEECD surveys TORCH literacy tests	Loss of number of students to selective school at end of last year likely to impact on average achievement, and may impact on average engagement: remove these students from earlier data if possible

Program and strategies	Target groups	Evaluation questions	Potential data to use	Factors potentially impacting on success

9. Advice from schools

So, what makes it all work? We asked some of the schools in which programs had very much improved retention and this is what they said:

A whole-of-school approach to working closely with the parents and engaging the broader community

Bringing the community into the school to provide program support

Staff who have a 'can do' attitude and a passion for their work

Developing and conducting specific preventative programs or strategies which are highly tailored to meet the specific needs of individual students or small groups

Careful selection of students into each program

Intensive intervention strategies delivered in one-on-one settings

Simple program administration - "make it easy for staff"

Resources specifically allocated to employ specialist staff

Dedicated space to conduct programs, so staff can work closely with small groups or individuals

Staff with specialist skills, networks beyond the education community and time dedicated to oversee and support these programs, that is, not teaching staff who might otherwise have "extra duties tagged on to a teaching load"

Support from the principal, leadership team and School Council

10. Who can help?

Toolbox 2 contains information about a range of community and government organisations that will be able to assist schools as they work to increase engagement and retention.

There are also web links to information about various overseas programs that have combined a number of strategies to improve student retention. In addition, the following are central resources for schools and offer a wealth of expertise:

• Regional Office staff, especially the Later Years Consultants.
  See **http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/structure/regions.htm**

• Staff in the Youth Transitions Division of the DEECD Head Office.
  See **http://www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/contacts.htm**

• The School-Focused Youth Service.
  See **http://www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/wellbeing/sfys.htm**

• The Office for Youth.
  See **http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/web21/ofy/dvcofy.nsf**

• Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENS).
  See **http://www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/youthtransition.htm**

• Regional Youth Affairs Networks.
  See **http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/web21/ofy/dvcofy.nsf/headingpagesdisplay/ regional+youth+affairs+networks**

Toolbox 1: Surveys and focus group questions

At risk students: Sample focus group questions

These are sample questions only - schools can select, alter or devise their own questions as appropriate.

N.B. It is important to start focus groups with some general questions that people will feel comfortable answering. In this way, the group can relax before focusing in on more specific questions.

Introduction:

Thanks everyone for coming today. We're going to be talking about how you find school - how comfortable you feel here, whether you're achieving what you'd like to, and what you'd change about school if you could. It's important that you're honest in your answers to the questions, otherwise we won't know how to improve what the school does for students. It's also important that everyone in the group is listened to and that their views are respected. We'll spend about ____ (time) talking together, and _____ (name) will be taking notes. Your ideas will be written down, but we'll make sure that when the information is passed onto the school, there's nothing there that could identify you. And so that people can feel free to be honest, I'd also ask that you don't talk about what people say here when you're outside the group.

Do you like coming to school here?

What is the best thing about the school? The worst?

Are you planning to stay at school until the end of Year 12? Why/why not?

Are there things about school that make you want to leave?

If you could get a job now, would you go?

Do you enjoy the work at school?

What work do you like doing the most at school? Why?

Are there other activities you'd like to do or do more of at school?

Do you feel that you're doing well at school?

Do you feel that you belong at the school?

Do you ever feel there issues with the other kids at school?

If you could change what you do at school in three ways, how would you change it?

Past students who have left before completing Year 12: Sample focus group questions

These are sample questions only - schools can select, alter or devise their own questions as appropriate.

N.B. It is important to start focus groups with some general questions that people will feel comfortable answering. In this way, the group can relax before focusing in on more specific questions.

Introduction:

Thanks everyone for coming today. We're going to be talking about school and your experiences after school - how helpful you found your time at school, what you've done since leaving and how you'd change school if you could. It's important that you're honest in your answers to these questions, otherwise we won't know how to improve what the school does for students. It's also important that everyone in the group is listened to and that their views are respected. We'll spend about ____ (time) talking together, and _____ (name) will be taking notes. Your ideas will be written down, but we'll make sure that when the information is passed onto the school, there's nothing there that could identify you. And so that people can feel free to be honest, I'd also ask that you don't talk about what people say here when you're outside the group.

Is this the first time you've been back to the school since you left?

Has it changed much? How did you find your time at school here?

What was the best thing about school? The worst?

What have you been doing since you left school? Do you enjoy it?

If you're in paid work, is work better or worse than school? Why?

Why did you leave school when you did?

Would you make the same decision if you had the chance again?

Were there things in your life that prevented you from staying in school?

Were there things about school that made you want to leave?

Did you feel that you were doing well at school when you left?

Did you feel that you belonged at the school when you left?

Were there issues with the other kids at school?

Parents of current students: Sample focus group questions

These are sample questions only - schools can select, alter or devise their own questions as appropriate.

N.B. It is important to start focus groups with some general questions that people will feel comfortable answering. In this way, the group can relax before focusing in on more specific questions.

Introduction:

Thanks everyone for coming today. We're going to be talking about this school, your children's experiences here, and how we might be able to improve what we do here to help students stay connected to learning. It's important that you're honest in your answers to the questions we ask, otherwise we won't know how to improve what the school does for students. It's also important that everyone in the group is listened to and that their views are respected. We'll spend about ____ (time) talking together, and _____ (name) will be taking notes. Your ideas will be written down, but we'll make sure that when the information is passed onto the school, there's nothing there that could identify you or your child. And so that people can feel free to be honest, I'd also ask that you don't talk about what people say here when you're outside the group.

How are your kids enjoying school generally? Do they like coming?

Do you feel the school does a good job of preparing your kids for life after school? What would you like to see changed?

What would you like to see the school do more of with students? Are there things the school does that you think should be dropped?

Do you go to information nights? Parent teacher interviews? If you don' t, are there things the school could do that would help you attend - for example, by changing the times that they' re held, or providing more notice?

Do you feel you get enough information about how your child is going at school? What would you like more information on?

Do you feel you and your child get enough information about subject choices? About the courses they can take?

Do you feel comfortable about contacting the school if there are issues with your child' s learning or happiness at school? Would you know who to contact?

Current students: Sample survey

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Connectedness	Most of my teachers get on well with me.				
	I have a teacher in the school I would feel happy to talk with about my problems.				
	I feel I belong at this school.				
	I mostly like coming to school.				
	My parent/s know who to speak to if they want to know how I'm going at school.				
Building trust and responsibility	Students have lots of opportunities to run things like assemblies at this school.				
	Students here have a say in what courses are offered.				
	Students will be listened to at this school if they want to change how things are done.				
Most teachers here trust the students.	At this school, there are opportunities for us to make or build things.				
	We get the chance to work with our hands here.				
	Students here have a lot of chances to create artworks and music.				
	You can learn by doing at this school.				
Catering for diversity	Kids who are different are accepted by staff and students at this school.				
	Kids who need some extra help to get through school usually get it here.				
	[If applicable] Koorie kids are accepted by staff and students at this school.				
	We have a wide choice of subjects here.				
Addressing poor achievement	Kids who are struggling with reading get extra help here.				
	Kids who are struggling with maths get extra help here.				
	This school expects students to work hard.				
	Students who work hard and achieve get a lot of recognition at this school.				
	Our teachers believe all students can learn.				
	You have to have a really good reason to be away from school here.				
Addressing students' practical personal obstacles to staying at school	I'd like to stay until Year 12, but I'll probably need to leave early to earn a living.				
	There are issues in my life that will make it hard for me to stay until the end of Year 12.				
	If something were making it hard for me to stay at school, the staff here would help me find a solution.				

Current staff : Sample survey

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Connectedness	Most students feel strong connections to this school.				
	I know the students I teach very well.				
	I frequently have contact with parents for matters other than behavioural problems.				
	I know the parents of most of my at-risk students very well.				
	Students with welfare issues are identified well at this school.				
	Students with welfare issues are referred to appropriate agencies quickly.				
	There is good internal communication within the school about student learning.				
	There is good internal communication within the school about student welfare issues.				
	Relationships between students and staff here are largely positive.				
	There is a lot of communication with parents about student achievement levels.				
	Attendance at parent-teacher interviews and information nights is good.				
Building trust and responsibility	The school gives students a lot of opportunities to exercise responsibility.				
	There are programs here that allow students to develop and demonstrate leadership qualities.				
	At-risk students have opportunities to exercise responsibility.				
	We seek student feedback here on the quality of our programs.				
	Students participate in community service programs.				
Tasks with tangible benefits	There is a large range of courses at the school that involve applied learning.				
	We offer students strong VET and VCAL programs.				
	There are strong creative arts-based programs at this school.				
Catering for diversity	This school is flexible in catering for students who do not "fit the mould".				
	This school works creatively with students who have caring responsibilities.				
	This school has comprehensive programs for PSD students.				
	There is strong and appropriate support for Koorie students.				
	Students with major welfare issues are not allowed to "fall through the cracks" here.				
	There is a good range of programs for students who are less academically inclined.				
	The school works extensively with other providers to offer a really broad range of programs.				

Current staff : Sample survey page 2

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Addressing poor achievement	Weak student achievement in literacy is addressed effectively here.				
	Weak student achievement in numeracy is addressed effectively here.				
	Learning times in key areas are maximised in this school.				
	There are supplementary programs that lift the achievement of the weakest students.				
	Raising literacy standards is seen as the responsibility of all teachers.				
	Raising numeracy standards is seen as the responsibility of all teachers.				
	All teachers have some training in literacy teaching.				
	All teachers have some training in numeracy teaching.				
	The school has a culture of high expectations for student achievement.				
	High student achievement is celebrated at this school.				
	Most teachers in this school believe all students can learn.				
	Students here are not excluded from many careers pathways by their achievement levels.				
	The school actively follows up all student absences.				
	There is recognition for good attendance (e.g. certificates).				
Address students' practical personal obstacles to staying at school	This school accesses support from a wide range of community and welfare groups.				
	The school connects poorer students to organisations offering financial scholarships.				
	The school has good connections with a range of educational providers who can offer alternatives to students.				
	The school is flexible in program provision.				

Toolbox 2: Other resources to assist schools

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
Broad curriculum provision in the senior years	VCAA	www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vet/index.html
	Curriculum Corporation: an independently operated, not-for-profit organisation owned by all Australian Education Ministers. It provides services and creates resources for all learning needs. Its curriculum products and services are dedicated to improving student learning and meeting the needs of the key stakeholders in education.	www.curriculum.edu.au/ccsite/cc_home,17988.html
Student Learning	Student learning programs assist teachers in the delivery of high quality and engaging learning and teaching programs that support student engagement and retention in the 21st century. An extensive range of resources and support materials is available to support teachers and schools in the implementation of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS). These resources present a comprehensive overview of what is being taught in the education system, how it is assessed, and the types of educational resources and programs that are available to support curriculum delivery.	http://www.education.vic.gov.au/teacher/default.htm
Offering quality Vocational Education and Training (VET) options	VCAA	www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vet/index.html
	General information about VET & VET Policy	www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vet/general/general.html
	Implementing VET	www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vet/implementation.html
	List of VET Programs	www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vet/programs/index.html
	Information about VET in Schools	www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/qualsprograms/vet.htm
	VET Scored assessment: VCE VET Programs with a Study Score	www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vet/programs/scoredasses.html
	School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships	www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vet/programs/newapprent.html
	VCAA Professional development for secondary school principals, teachers and administration staff.	http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/career/profdev.html
Providing programs that are challenging and stimulating	Career and Transition Resource Kit: a series of career development lesson plans, linked to VELS, for Years 6 to Year 10. Detailed teacher notes and student handouts are included in the areas of: Self awareness, Opportunity awareness, Decision Learning and Transition planning. Guidelines for using the resources with targeted groups including: Koorie, ESL/CALD/ students with disabilities, regional and remote, and young people not in employment, education and training.	www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/teacherresources/catresourcekit/default.htm
	The Real Game: a series of career and life skills education programs to help students see the connection between school studies and life after school. The programs are paper-based and designed for group work in the classroom. Five different programs are used for students from Year 3 to Year 12.	www.realgame.gov.au www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/teacherresources/realgame/default.htm

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
	Rock Eisteddfod Challenge: a nationwide competition involving students in music, dance and drama.	www.rockchallenge.com.au
Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy skill growth	**TORCH (Tests of Reading Comprehension):** a set of graded texts (fiction and non-fiction) designed to assist teachers in their assessment of students' reading comprehension skills.	www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/ teachingresources/english/literacy/assessment/ lvl36torch.htm
	Literacy Coaches Literacy Improvement Teams Initiatve – a targeted School Improvement Initiative. Intent of the Literacy Initiative: • Support nominated schools with significant numbers of students in P-10 who are achieving well below expected literacy levels • Focus is on building capacity of teachers rather than intervention with students • Provides one-to-one coaching for teachers in classrooms • Builds sustainable practice in schools • Teachers rather than students are the focus • Designed to enable schools to establish clear literacy improvement goals and reform literacy teaching • Sits within the broader context of school improvement through Regional Literacy Improvement Teams	Gillian Essex, Manager of Literacy and English, 9637 2302
	Reading LINK-Decoding program for teachers and students, authored by Dr Carol Christensen, School of Education, University of Queensland.	www.uq.edu.au/news/?article=8323 www.uq.edu.au/uqresearchers/researcher/ christensenca.html?uv_category=pub www.kbs.com.au/education/subjects.asp?sub=11
Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy skill growth continued	**Universities have a range of staff who may be able to assist schools. Schools in the Effective Strategies project had worked with:**	www.findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/researcher/ person16425.html
	• **Dr John Munro, University of Melbourne:** educational psychologist and researcher on literacy and numeracy learning	www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/eldi/selage/documents/ LLDT-Highreliablilty.pdf home.vicnet.net.au/~sail/john.htm
	• **Professor Peter Sullivan Researcher** on mathematics learning	www.education.monash.edu.au/profiles/psulliv
Programs to counter low achievement	**'You Can Do It':** a program promoting student achievement and social and emotional well-being	www.youcandoit.com.au/Home/ [dot com site]
Pathways planning and quality careers guidance and counselling	**Career and Transition Resource Kit:** (see above)	www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/ teacherresources/catresourcekit/default.htm
	Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs) Includes case studies of good practice, a supporting electronic resource kit, students at risk mapping tool, accountability requirements and professional development	www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/ mips/default.htm

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
	Youth Central: A Victorian website, designed by young people, providing information on studying, training, jobs, health, money managing, housing and other areas relevant to young people	www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/
	Commonwealth Youth Pathways Program: assists eligible 13 to 19 year olds through school and their transition to further training education and work	www.youthpathways.dest.gov.au
	Where to Now? Skills Victoria: Victorian course and careers information for prospective students, apprentices, training organisations and employers.	www.skills.vic.gov.au
	myfuture: Australia's national online career information and exploration service. The website is designed to assist people of all ages as they make career choices and plan career pathways.	www.myfuture.edu.au/
	Year 12 – What next?: Guide for Year 12 students planning their post-school education and training	www.year12whatnext.gov.au
	Hobson's Guides: Database of course, careers and education institutions as well as ratings and rankings to help in making choices	www.thegoodguides.com.au
	Victorian Government Workplace Information: Information about employment and government assistance in Australia including wages, working conditions, labour markets and careers	www.workplace.gov.au
	Job outlook: Information on job prospects, employment rates and average income of jobs	www.jobsearch.gov.au/joboutlook
	Job Juice: Information for young people about jobs and finding work	www.jobjuice.gov.au
	Skills Initiative: Information on jobs for which there are current staff shortages and other general career options	www.skillsinitiative.gov.au
	ENYA (Enterprise Network for Young Australians): An organisation set up to promote the active participation of young people in business	www.enya.org.au
	The National Innovation website: Information about setting up innovative businesses	www.innovation.gov.au
	Career Advice Australia: An Australian Government initiative that provides a comprehensive national career development and transition support system for young people aged 13 to 19 years.	www.careeradviceaustralia.gov.au/
Strategic use of teachers and teaching resources Mini-school or school-within-a-school organization	Career Education Lighthouse Schools Project: Federal funding for schools to develop models of good practice in quality careers education, and in particular develop means of integrating careers education across the curriculum. The site contains information on school's experiences and models.	www.careerlighthouse.deewr.gov.au/
	Developing pathways - VELS Years 9 and 10	vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/stages/yrs9and10/index.html

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
	Career Education Association Victoria (CEAV): The Victorian peak body for secondary school careers advisers, work experience coordinators, VET coordinators and MIPS coordinators.	www.ceav.vic.edu.au
	PACTS - Parents as Career and Transition Support: a series of workshops and resources developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence to provide parents with information about career transition that enables them to support their teenager when they are making career transition decisions.	/www.careerconnectionsnortheast.com.au/ Text/1170205305703-9333/
	Curriculum Corporation: an independently operated, not-for-profit organisation owned by all Australian Education Ministers. It provides services and creates resources for all learning needs. Its curriculum products and services are dedicated to improving student learning and meeting the needs of the key stakeholders in education.	www.curriculum.edu.au/ccsite/cc_home,17988.html
	There are a number of international school reform programs that incorporate mini-schools or small learning communities. They include:	
	Career Academies: Typically serving between 150 and 200 students from grades 9 or 10 through grade 12, Career Academies have three distinguishing features: (1) they are organized as small learning communities to create a more supportive, personalized learning environment; (2) they combine academic and career and technical curricula around a career theme to enrich teaching and learning; and (3) they establish partnerships with local employers to provide career awareness and work-based learning opportunities for students. They aim to prepare students for both vocational and academic/university pathways.	www.fldoe.org/workforce/careeracademies/ca_home. asp

www.ncacinc.com/index.php?option=com_content&task =blogcategory&id=17&Itemid=28

casn.berkeley.edu/ Career Academies Support Network |
| | **Talent Development High Schools/Talent Development Middle Schools:** The Talent Development model was designed to improve achievement and graduation rates in high-poverty urban high schools where many students enter ninth grade one or more years behind grade level in math and reading. Talent Development reorganizes schools into several small learning communities to create a more supportive learning environment with better relationships among teachers and students. | www.csos.jhu.edu/tdhs/about/model.htm Information and resources on the Talent Development High School model. In particular, see: www.csos.jhu.edu/tdhs/pdf/AcademyFormation.pdf |
| | **First Things First: a** framework for whole-school reform that aims to help students at all academic levels gain the skills to succeed in post-secondary education. The program places an emphasis on strengthening relationships between students and adults, improving student engagement, and improving the alignment and rigor of teaching and learning in every classroom. | irre.org/ftf/ |

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
Team-based approaches to teaching, learning and pastoral care	The above reform programs generally incorporate team-based approaches to teaching, learning and pastoral care.	
Priority professional development	DEECD teacher professional learning website	www.education.vic.gov.au/proflearning/teacher/default.htm
Community service	Advance - A Victorian Program for Youth Development. Advance is a school-based program that provides practical opportunities for young people to participate in their local community. The goal of Advance is to enable young people's participation and volunteering in community life.	www.youth.vic.gov.au/Web21/ofy/rwpgslib.nsf/GraphicFiles/Advance+Fact+Sheet+07+Word/$file/Advance+Fact+Sheet+2007+Word.doc
	St John Ambulance Cadets: Aims to develop leadership and team buildings skills in young people aged 11-17 years through the focus activity of first aid.,	www.sjaa.com.au/com-volunteers-cadet-programs.asp
	Youth Foundations Victoria: An initiative to support young people become active participants in community activities, building skills in leadership, project planning and management, and enhancing community connections .	www.youth.vic.gov.au/Web21/ofy/dvcofy.nsf/allDocs/RWP7B0469857D44AE1ACA25721D0081E416?OpenDocument
	Green Corps: An Australian Government youth development and environmental training program for young people aged between 17 and 20 years.	www.greencorps.gov.au/
	APEX Australia: A community-based organisation promoting service, fellowship and community spirit Apex Youth Clubs encourage secondary school aged children to become involved in community activities.	www.apex.org.au/our-future-our-youth/youth-clubs.aspx
	Red Cross Australia: A humanitarian organisation working to improve the lives of vulnerable groups in society.	
	Red Cross Y Challenge is a program supporting teams of young people to make positive social change through the development of community projects.	www.redcross.org.au/ourservices_acrossaustralia_youtheducation_programs_Ychallenge.htm
	Operation New Start: A joint initiative between the Victorian Police and Department of Education which promotes the engagement of students at risk in a high challenge, outdoor pursuit program.	www.opnewstart.org/
	Youth Transition Support Initiative: The Victorian Youth Transition Support Initiative assists disengaged young people aged 15 to 19 to obtain a sustainable education, training or employment option. The initiative targets young people who have been disengaged from school for 6 months or longer. Twenty-four transition support workers are employed by funded organisations across twelve Local Learning and Employment Network areas within Victoria. These areas were selected based on rates of Year 12 or equivalent completion and numbers of young people who are not in education, training or full time employment.	www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/youthtransition.htm

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
	Youth Participation and Access Program: Funded by the Victorian Government Office for Youth to deliver a mix of activities for targeted groups of vulnerable young people. Grants of between $30,000 and $50,000 per annum over three years are provided to successful applicants to deliver a range of activities for young people in local communities.	www.youth.vic.gov.au/Web21/ofy/dvcofy.nsf/allDocs/RWP43482A2D0A2661C3CA2570BC000C7A1C?OpenDocument
	Beacon Foundation: A national not-for-profit organisation, addresses the issue of youth employment by working with young people before they leave school to help them develop the skills and confidence needed to achieve personal success for themselves and their community. Beacon projects include 'No Dole' and 'Real Jobs.'	www.beaconfoundation.net/
	It's Not OK To Be Away: A statewide DEECD initiative building a school and community approach to the issue of student attendance	www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/wellbeing/attendance/initiative.htm
	Better practice in school attendance - improving the school attendance of Indigenous students: A report providing advice on how to support better school attendance among Indigenous students	www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/publications_resources/profiles/better_practice_school_attendance_improving_indigenous.htm
Initiatives to improve connections with parents	**STRIDE:** A non-government foundation creating and delivering programs to students, teachers and parents with the aim of developing supportive communities for young people	www.stride.org.au/index.html
	Reach Foundation: Facilitates life skills programs for young adults throughout Victoria, with an emphasis on physically and emotionally challenging activities.	www.reach.org.au/
	Reach Parents' Program: A series of workshops designed in association with the Centre of Adolescent Health to support the development of healthy relationships between parents and their teenagers.	www.reach.org.au/index.php?id=1
Student Wellbeing and Health Support	**Student Wellbeing:** The Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools describes the principles, arrangements and the additional resources provided to strengthen student welfare and support services.	www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/wellbeing/policy.htm
Conflict resolution, mediation or problem-solving programs	**Dealing with Problems at School:** DEECD information site	www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/childhealth/problemsatschool.htm
	What is bullying?: DEECD information site	www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/safety/bullying/what.htm
	Safe Schools are Effective Schools: DEECD Information Site	www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/safety/bullying/safeschoolstrategy

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
	SCRAM (Schools Conflict Resolution And Mediation): an initiative of the Western Australian Dispute Resolution Association), SCRAM is a role play program for secondary school students facilitating the development of peaceful dispute resolution awareness.	hwww.scram.business.ecu.edu.au/
	Conflict Resolution Directory: Provides links to conflict resolution organisations, networks and resources in Australia and internationally.	www.trinity.wa.edu.au/plduffyrc/subjects/languages/conflict.htm
	STRIDE (see above)	www.stride.org.au/index.html
	'Habits of Mind': A program to develop critical thinking and problem solving.	www.habits-of-mind.net/
	Direct Attention Thinking Tools (DATT): A series of strategies for thinking in a more comprehensive, effective and efficient way.	www.debonothinkingsystems.com/tools/DATT.htm
Student case management	Reach Foundation (see above)	www.reach.org.au/index.php?id=1
	ISIS Primary Care: Works in partnership with local communities in the Western Metropolitan Region of Melbourne to provide responsive, interconnected health and community services.	www.isispc.com.au/mission.php
	Foundation House for refugees: The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST), or 'Foundation House', provides a range of services to people from refugee backgrounds who have survived torture or war-related trauma.	www.foundationhouse.org.au/about/index.htm
	Headspace: Australia's National Youth Mental Health Foundation established to support the development of improved mental health and drug and alcohol services for young people aged 12-25. Seven locations across Victoria.	www.headspace.org.au/home/
	Adolescent Support Program: A program of Good Shepherd Youth and Family service providing support to young people aged 12-17 who experience a wide range of social and emotional difficulties. The majority of these young people are referred by the Department of Human Services and live in, or have strong connections to, the City of Yarra.	www.goodshepvic.org.au/www/385/1001127/displayarticle/1002403.html
	Berry Street: An independent child and family welfare organisation providing a range of intensive mentoring, counselling and case management programs for highly at-risk students	www.berrystreet.org.au/index.cfm?p=436
Mentoring	Youth Pathways - A free, federally-funded service that aims to assist the most at-risk young people to make a successful transition through to completion of year 12	www.careeradviceaustralia.gov.au/youthpathways/schools/default.htm
	The Mentoring and Capacity Building Initiative (MCBI) The MCBI is managed through the Office for Youth under the leadership of the Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs. A strategic, coordinated framework for mentoring young people -'Leading the Way: The Victorian Government's Strategic Framework on Mentoring Young People' is available on the website.	www.youth.vic.gov.au/

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
	Beacon Foundation (see above) Buddy Up Program,: A mentoring program being trialled in schools in 2008.	www.beaconfoundation.net/ www.beaconfoundation.net/view_news.php?news_id=331
	STRIDE (see above) Inspire mentoring programs Mentoring Through Music	www.stride.org.au/inspire.html www.stride.org.au/mentoring_through_music.html
	The Smith Family: a non-profit organisation providing prevention and early intervention programs to disadvantaged families. Mentoring programs include iTrack, Next Steps and Plan-it Youth. The Learning for Life program also provides mentoring to students in need of support to complete their education	www.thesmithfamily.com.au/site/page.cfm www.thesmithfamily.com.au/site/page.cfm?u=34
	Australian Red Cross Australia: runs a number of teen mentoring programs across Victoria	www.redcross.org.au/default.asp
	Berry Street (see above)	www.berrystreet.org.au/index.cfm?p=436
	Victorian Youth Mentoring Association: A representative organisation of youth mentoring programs in Victoria. Facilitates professional development forums, practice-based networks, advocacy, etc.	www.youthmentoringvic.org.au/
	Youth Mentoring Network: An initiative which aims to work with interested youth mentoring organisations and practitioners to promote the development of high quality youth mentoring programs.	www.youthmentoring.org.au/
	Big Brothers Big Sisters' In-School Mentoring: A program to assist vulnerable young people in need of additional adult support and to help strengthen self-worth, trust and relationships at home and school.	www.bigbrothersbigsisters.org.au/bbbsau/1whatwedo.htm
	GOALS Mentoring Program, run by the Australian Business and Community Network: GOALS is a one-on-one mentoring partnership that aims to widen the life choices of students considered to be at risk of disengaging from school. Whether it is the environment, circumstances or resulting attitudes that discourage the student from completing school, the mentoring program seeks to engage and encourage them to achieve a productive working and personal life.	www.abcn.com.au/what-we-do/108/
Welfare support	The Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies: Provides a wide list of links to various support agencies and initiatives and to research in the field.	www.acys.info/topics
	Victorian government support includes: The School Start Bonus: A one-off grant to assist with start up costs in years Prep and 7.	
	The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA): Provides assistance to low-income families by helping with the costs associated with the education of their children.	www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/lifeatschool/schoolstartfaq.htm www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/lifeatschool/ema/default.htm

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
	Federal government support includes: Youth Allowance: Financial assistance for 16-24 year old students, undertaking apprenticeships or looking for work. Child Care Benefit and Family Assistance: Includes financial assistance with outside school hours care and vacation care costs	www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/youth_allow.htm www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/childcare_benefit.htm
	Open Family Australia: Provides outreach services and support to young people at-risk between the ages of 12 and 25 years. Operate programs in Melbourne, the Bellarine Peninsula, North East Victoria	www.openfamily.com.au/?56
	Anglicare Victoria: Provides services for alcohol and drug counselling, disability support, emergency accommodation, family violence support, financial counselling, foster care, out-of-home care, parent education, and other services.	www.anglicarevic.org.au
	Melbourne City Mission: A non-denominational organisation providing a range of support services for youth and families including youth at risk of homelessness and their families.	www.melbournecitymission.org.au/
	Youth Beyond Blue: A national web-based information service for young people focusing on mental health issues, particularly depression and anxiety.	www2.youthbeyondblue.com/ybblue/
	Living is for Everyone (LIFE): A suicide-prevention website with a range of information and links to resources	www.livingisforeveryone.com.au/
	Berry Street (see above): Runs a range of welfare programs for at-risk families and students, including community programs, disability services, education services, foster care, residential care, counselling and mentoring.	www.berrystreet.org.au/index.cfm?p=436
	Reach Out: A youth-focused website that contains information and resources about mental health, family, eating disorders and drug and alcohol issues.	www.reachout.com.au/home.asp
Targeted assistance for skill development among low achievers	Guitars for Schools: An initiative of the Music Council of Australia's 'Music. Play for Life' campaign. Provides guitars to students with promise and commitment and matches them to music teachers.	www.guitarsforschools.org.au/content/view/35/6
	Career and Transition Resource Kit: (see above - particularly guidelines for using the resources with targeted groups including: Koorie, ESL/CALD/ students with disabilities, regional and remote, and young people not in employment, education and training).	www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/teacherresources/catresourcekit/default.htm
	Ardoch Youth Foundation: facilitates community support for disadvantaged young people to encourage them to stay at school and to increase their life options LinCS Project: facilitates partnerships with business organisations to support schools.	www.ardoch.asn.au/ www.ardoch.asn.au/4397450/ardoch-youth-foundation-making-education-a-reali.htm

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
Tutoring and peer tutoring	STAR Peer Tutoring: a university-to-school peer tutoring program initiated by Murdoch University The site links to information about a range of peer tutoring programs across the world – click on the "Peer tutoring – Links around the world" link.	about.murdoch.edu.au/star/peer_tutoring/peertute.html
Supplementary or out-of-school-time programs	YMCA Programs for Youth	www.victoria.ymca.org.au/cpa/htm/htm_article.asp?page_id=245
	Duke of Edinburgh Award: A program of voluntary self-development activities designed to challenge young people aged 14-25 years.	www.theaward.com.au/home.html
Pathways planning for at-risk students	Students At Risk Mapping Tool	www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/mips/sar/background.htm#H2N1000B
	Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs): DEECD site (see above)	www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/mips/default.htm
	Wannik – DEECD's Education Strategy for Koorie Students	www.education.vic.gov.au/about/news/newsalerts/indigenousstrat.htm
	Career and Transition Resource Kit: (see above - particularly guidelines for using the resources with targeted groups including: Koorie, ESL/CALD/ students with disabilities, regional and remote, and young people not in employment, education and training).	www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/teacherresources/catresourcekit/default.htm
	Futures for Young Adults: DHS program providing support to students with a disability to make the transition to post-school options. It is available to eligible students from when they complete their schooling until they turn 21.	www.dhs.vic.gov.au/disability/supports_for_people/being_part_of_my_community/futures_for_young_adults
Targeted financial support	DEECD Student Scholarships: grants of $250 to $2,000 offered to students who fit a range of criteria including: academic excellence, community participation, financial need, etc.	www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/scholarships/default.aspx
	Youth Central: (see above – particualrly section on managing money)	www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/
	Education Foundation: offers 3 different types of scholarships to students facing challenges at school.	http://www.educationfoundation.org.au/OurWork/Scholarships/Scholarship.html
	The Smith Family (see above) Learning for Life: this suite of programs provides disadvantaged students with financial support and access to other personal support options.	www.thesmithfamily.com.au/site/page.cfm?u=9

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
	The Beacon Foundation (see above) Regional Scholarships: capped funding to undertake a Certificate or Diploma at TAFE.	/www.carolinechisholm.org.au/portal/page/portal/CCEF%20Home/Educational%20Grants/Beacon%20Foundation%20Regional%20Scholarships
	Western Chances: provides scholarships and other programs to students in western metropolitan Melbourne	www.westernchances.org.au/
	Coca-Cola Australia Foundation: Community Grants: One-off support for local community education and leadership programs targeting marginalised youth.	www.ccamatil.com.au/FoundationGuidlelines.asp
	The Caltex Best All Rounder Award: A recognition award to final year students acknowledging their all-round contributions to their schools and communities.	www.caltex.com.au/community_spo_allrounder.asp
	Australian Defence Long Tan Leadership Award: a Department of Defence award scheme which recognises leadership and teamwork in individual Year 10-12 students	www.defence.gov.au/longtanawards/index.htm
Project-based learning for disengaged students	Hands-On Learning: A school-based program for at-risk students, usually in Years 7 to 10, in which students are engaged one day a week working on creative projects in their local community. The program aims to build both interpersonal and practical skills, along with students' resilience.	www.handsonlearning.info/
	AUSSI (Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative): Involves participants in a project-based, whole-of-school approach, to explore through real-life learning experiences, ways of improving the school's management of resources and facilities.	sustainability.ceres.org.au/files/sei_program_sustainable_schools.htm
Creative arts-based programs for at-risk students	The Song Room: The Song Room is a National not-for-profit organisation that provides opportunities for enhanced learning and development for disadvantaged children through music and creative arts	www.songroom.org.au/home
	U.K. Creative Partnerships An innovative program in which a creative arts practitioner is based at a school as an artist-in-residence to work with students.	www.creative-partnerships.com/aboutcp/

Strategy	Resources to support implementation	Contacts (Web references, telephones, e-mails)
	Culture,gov.au: Provides access via search facilities to national and local culture and recreation websites. Websites in Victoria for youth audiences:	culture.gov.au/ culture.gov.au/search/banner/s97_cgi.exe?Action=Filter Search&Filter=csf.act&SearchType=Search&qtext=&cat egory2=&state=Victoria&audience=Youth
	Westside Circus: A community organisation providing creative arts opportunities for young people, including school programs.	www.westsidecircus.org.au/
Programs to improve students' social skills	DEECD Interpersonal Development Domain: Contains links to: the Victorian Essential Learning Standards; interpersonal development learning-related learning and teaching support materials.	www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/ teachingresources/interpersonaldevelop/default.htm
	MindMatters: A national mental health initiative which provides resources to support Australian secondary schools in promoting and protecting the mental health of school communities.	cms.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters/index.htm cms.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters/vic/vic.htm
	Beacon Foundation (see above): Polish Program: a career preparation course focusing on personal presentation and communication skills	www.beaconfoundation.net/polish.php

Toolbox 3: Student Mapping Tool

Student Mapping Tool

The Student Mapping Tool (previously known as the Students At Risk Mapping Tool) allows schools to easily identify students who have characteristics that are known to increase the risk of early school leaving.

The process involves drawing down relevant data from the DEECD's CASES21 student database and presenting it in an accessible spreadsheet format. The software and the Tool, are available to Victorian government schools free of charge.

The end-product of the process is an Excel spreadsheet that shows which students are experiencing, or have experienced, risk factors that are common among early school leavers and allows schools to map, monitor evaluate the success of interventions used.

Risk Factors explored by the Student Mapping Tool include:

- Poor attendance
- Low literacy
- Low numeracy
- Problematic school behaviour and relationships through the number of suspensions and the number of days suspended.
- Low income or unemployed family background - the occupation code of parents.
- Koorie or Torres Strait Islander background
- Refugee or ESL status
- Presence of a physical disability
- Presence of learning disorders leading to integration support
- Receipt of Youth Allowance
- Restricted Access arrangements as a result of parent separation
- Presence of a Risk alert
- Experience of significant health issues.

The Tool will generate easily understood data about each student, and about groups of students, that can underpin school conversations about a range of matters including:

- Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs)
- absenteeism
- literacy and numeracy support
- welfare and discipline.

Using the Tool should encourage staff to consider the whole child, and to take a whole-school approach to meeting each child's needs. The Tool can also be used to support a student's transition from school to school, campus to campus, or even year to year.

The Mapping Tool was developed by the Brimbank Melton LLEN and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and is available to all Victorian Government Schools free of charge.

Information on the Student Mapping Tool is available on http://www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/mips/sar/default.htm